

Submission to the Inquiry into Unconventional Gas In Victoria

Submitted by Chelsea Heights EarthCarers

Chelsea Heights EarthCarers is a community group based in Chelsea Heights Victoria and a sub-committee of the Chelsea Heights Community Centre that exists to:

- empower people to reduce their impact on the environment
- contribute to wider discussion and policy on climate change.

Around 10 – 12 people regularly attend meetings with up to 70 people attending workshops and seminars organised by the group. The EarthCarers mailing list includes over 80 local community members.

As a group we are greatly concerned about the threat of climate change. We act to help our local community minimize their own responsibility for greenhouse emissions and encourage decision makers to make choices to do the same on a far broader scale. We have a focus on long-term food security and strongly advocate the ability to purchase locally grown food. We believe that minimising the distance food travels is an important factor in addressing climate change. In line with this we have established a successful community garden.

Summary

Chelsea Heights EarthCarers opposes any form of unconventional gas mining (including coal seam gas, tight gas, shale gas & underground coal gasification) in Victoria (or elsewhere) and urge the inquiry to recommend Victoria introduces a permanent ban on all forms of unconventional gas mining.

Responses to Terms of Reference

Our responses to specific Terms of Reference of the Inquiry are below.

(2) the environmental, land productivity and public health risks, risk mitigations and residual risks of onshore unconventional gas activities;

Australia and Victoria have proportionally very small amounts of land suitable for commercial food production. Much of this land, particularly around Melbourne is already lost or under threat due to expanding housing stock.

We strongly believe that protection of Victoria's remaining viable food growing land is crucial to our future food security and economic sustainability. We see this as being far more important and bringing far more benefits than the extraction of unconventional gas from this land.

Gas extraction would bring limited benefits to Victoria for a limited amount of time and carries with it large risks that are still poorly understood. Maintaining land for agriculture, under the care of farmers who understand the land and how to care for it, will bring on-going benefits to all Victorians in terms of food security and economic stability.

Extraction of unconventional gas from beneath Victoria's farmland has great risks that are poorly understood. It would put the ability of our farmland to continue to produce food in great jeopardy. These risks include:

- contamination of water with toxic chemicals, leading to poisoning of livestock and contamination of crops
- increase in groundwater and soil salinity reducing the short and long-term viability of the land
- depletion of groundwater

These risks to agriculture are too great for such a crucial, on-going facet of Victoria's long-term viability.

Studies have shown unconventional gas extraction has resulted in health risks including neurological effects, skin irritations, nosebleeds, asthma, potential impacts on the unborn, increases in particulate carcinogens, and release of high levels of toxic chemicals. None of these risks are associated with the production of wind, solar or other renewable energy. In addition, climate change itself, as a result of the impacts of release of green house gases from fossil fuels will bring untold health impacts on us all.

As a government that has committed to acting to reduce the risks of dangerous climate change any further investment into fossil fuel extraction would be hypocritical and irresponsible. Extraction of unconventional gas with its greater uncertainty in terms of both risks and outputs is ludicrous.

Alternative energy sources are readily available that do not need to impact on the viability of other industries and do not threaten a safe climate future. Wind turbines can easily co-exist with agriculture. Solar power can be installed on rooftops (both industrial and household), over water (eg sewerage plants) and in areas where agriculture is not viable.

Placing a permanent ban on unconventional gas exploration will strongly position Victoria as a leader on climate change.

(3) the coexistence of onshore unconventional gas activities with existing land and water uses, including —

- (a) agricultural production and domestic and export market requirements;**
- (b) the legal rights of property owners and the impact on property values; and**
- (c) any implications for local and regional development, investment and jobs;**

In addition to the impacts detailed above, unconventional gas activities will bring with it the imposition of roads and infrastructure that carve up current agriculture land further reducing agriculture operations viability. Productivity of crops and fields will fall dramatically or become unworkable if farmers need to work around this additional infrastructure.

4) the ability of potential onshore unconventional gas resources contributing to the State's overall energy sources including —

- (a) an ability to provide a competitive source of energy and non energy inputs for Victorian industries;**
- (b) an affordable energy source for domestic consumers; and**
- (c) carbon dioxide emissions from these sources**

According to the Australian Energy Market Operator, there is no shortage of gas supplies in Victoria. There is no benefit to introducing this risky industry.

Gas prices have been rising dramatically over recent years due to the linking of gas to the international market via exporting LPG. Mining more gas will not alter this and prices are expected to continue to rise. Assisting Victorians to become more energy efficient, eg through support for making houses more energy efficient, will have far greater impact on reducing costs for consumers.

Unconventional gas extraction results in release of very potent green house gases including methane, that nullify any greenhouse gas saving associated with the transition from coal to gas.

(6) relevant domestic and international reviews and inquiries covering the management of risks for similar industries including, but not limited to, the Victorian Auditor-General Office's report *Unconventional Gas: Managing Risks and Impacts* (contingent upon this report being presented to Parliament) and other reports generated by the Victorian community and stakeholder engagement programs.

A paper released by 'PSE Healthy Energy' in June 2015 shows that this industry has progressed without adequate knowledge of its risks. It states, 'While research continues to lag behind the rapid scaling of unconventional forms of oil and gas development, there has been a surge of peer-reviewed scientific papers published in recent years (Figure 1). In fact, of all the available literature on the impacts of shale gas development nearly 80% has been published since January 1, 2013 and over 50% in just the past year and a half (since January 1, 2014).' Its review of recent studies finds that overwhelmingly there are enormous risks associated with unconventional gas extraction. This paper is attached.

Conclusion

The Victorian government needs to demonstrate its commitment to being a leader on preventing dangerous climate change and its commitment to its agricultural (and tourism) industry – both to maintain jobs and long-term food security. To do this it needs to implement a permanent ban on unconventional gas drilling.

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