Submission

The Moira Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Planning regarding the “Inquiry into Unconventional Gas in Victoria”. The submission relates to Sections 3 and 4 of the Terms of Reference.

ToR Section 3

Moira Shire Council has currently adopted its revised Council Plan 2013-2017. This document gives priority to three strategic goals that will enable Council, in partnership with the community to meet our challenges and strengthen the local economy and social wellbeing. One of the three strategic goals is to “build on our economic strengths in agriculture, manufacturing and tourism”.

Moira Shire is in the Goulburn Broken region of Victoria, otherwise known as Victoria’s food bowl. Agriculture is the major industry in the Moira Shire contributing $386.9m output to the economy and accounting for 19.2% of employment. In addition to this the manufacturing sector, driven by the agricultural industry, contributes an additional $942.5m output and 14.8% of employment. 71% of the land in Moira Shire is under agriculture with an approximately equal split of this land being dry land and irrigation. The irrigation in Moira Shire is part of the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District which is currently undergoing a $2billion dollar system efficiency upgrade with funding from both State and Federal bodies.

The Katunga Water Supply Protection Area (WSPA) covers approximately 2,100 km² of the Moira Shire. There is a large volume of groundwater stored in the aquifers in the WSPA. A management plan is in place to ensure that the groundwater resources within the aquifers are managed equitably and sustainably.

The groundwater profile consists of a shallow aquifer of isolated shoestring sands in a silt and clay layer called the Shepparton Formation which overlays unconsolidated alluvial deposits generally referred to as the Murray Valley Deep Lead Aquifier System (Katunga Deep Lead).

The Shepparton Formation contains large deposits of water that is extensively extracted for stock, domestic and irrigation. The Katunga Deep Lead is a potable water source that is suitable and used for township water supply.

There are currently 256 Katunga Deep Lead licence holders who can extract up to 60,577MgL of water per year from the aquifer. The dairy and horticulture industries within Moira Shire have been extensive users of both the Shepparton Formation and the Katunga Deep Lead and new industries such as the hot house developments at Katunga are currently investing in this water source. Fracking may create an issue because both these water sources lie above the bedrock that must be fracked to extract the gas so extreme care would need to be taken to stop any contamination from chemical and water injection into the fracked bedrock leaking into the pristine deep lead water.
The Katunga WSPA, along with the Goulburn Murray Water irrigation system are vital contributors to Victoria’s agricultural and economic output. They also provide significant protection and reduce the agricultural sectors exposure to drought and climate change.

Research indicates that in Moira Shire surface water availability will decrease and temperatures will increase as a result of climate change. Added to recent struggles and uncertainty with market forces and drought, the effects of a changing climate may be a bridge-too-far for current agribusinesses.

Moira Shire Council is currently supporting the agricultural sector in a number of ways, for example:

- leading a joint project with the support of the Victorian Government (VAS Partnership) known as ‘Climate Smart Agricultural Adaptation’ (CSAD). The CSAD project aims to provide region-specific climate change impact information to underpin strategic planning and regional development and to enable councils to plan for and support agricultural business development; both now and into the future. CSAD focuses on regional development, infrastructure and agricultural industry transformation;
- by commissioning a report ‘Farmland In Transition’ in September 2013 and working with the agriculture sector to implement recommendations of the report to assist the sector understand and adapt to a changing environment, and to recognize and grasp diversification and growth opportunities; and
- working with the agriculture and food manufacturing sector to build management and strategic capability to enable businesses to recognize, plan for and capture opportunities such as increased innovation and productivity and access export markets to enable business and employment growth.

Introducing onshore unconventional gas exploration and extraction into this environmentally sensitive and economically important region is not supported by Moira Shire. There is doubt about the long term impact (pollution of waterways) and sustainability of the fracking processes involved. Also it would contribute another element of uncertainty to the future of agriculture in the region when it could be argued that increased and longer term government support would be more appropriate.

**ToR Section 4**

In the revised Moira Shire Council Plan four enabling objectives are defined to guide Council to achieve its strategic goals. One of these enabling objectives is “smarter delivery of existing services and programs”.

One of the ways we are delivering smarter services is through Councils commitment to decreasing Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions. This is by improving Councils internal operations and supporting the community to reduce their environmental footprint through delivering projects and services that have triple bottom line outcomes.
Moira Shire is looking to reduce its own GHG emissions by, for example:

- investing in leading technology e.g. retrofitting our ~1,800 street lights to LED;
- improving utility monitoring, reporting and management; and
- continuing to explore and apply environmentally sustainable design principles into council buildings.

Examples of how Moira Shire is looking to support its community to reduce its GHG emissions include:

- introducing a full kerbside organic service to the four main towns in the Shire (~ 75% of households) therefore reducing the GHG emissions by significantly decreasing the volume of organics to landfill;
- participating in a research project, with support from the Victoria Government (VAS Partnership) exploring the concept of using regional community owned assets to host renewable energy generation infrastructure and therefore drive investment in local electricity generation and infrastructure; and
- participating in numerous community and school educational activities focusing on natural resource management, all aspects of water and utility use and waste management.

The introduction of onshore unconventional gas exploration and extraction into the Moira Shire region of Victoria is not supported. Council believes that investment in and development of the Victorian energy sector should concentrate on renewables. This would demonstrate a commitment to establishing an exciting new future while supporting the growth of an emerging industry and demonstrating the alignment of Victoria’s values and vision with that of the progressive regions and countries around the world.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, as mentioned above the 2015 revision of the Council Plan reiterates the position that agriculture is a strength and priority for Moira Shire Council. There are concerns about the impact that the exploration, extraction, production and rehabilitation of unconventional gas will have on the agricultural sector. These concerns include:

- potential damage or pollution of the significant aquifers in the Katunga WSPA; and
- continued or additional uncertainty in the future of the agricultural sector.

Furthermore, Moira Shire is committed to looking to operate smarter into the future. Therefore Council believes that significant investment in and development of the Victorian energy sector should concentrate on renewables. Investing, at this time, in unconventional gas exploration and extraction in the Moira Shire region of Victoria would miss an exciting opportunity to redefine our energy industry and supply; for both now and the future.

**Prepared by Moira Shire Council**