

As members of the Sustainable Boolarra Group we would like to make a submission to the State Government Inquiry into Onshore Unconventional Gas in Victoria on behalf of our members and the residents of our town and the surrounding farmland. As a group we are confident we represent the vast majority of residents in Boolarra, Boolarra South and the surrounding areas covered by the 3870 postcode in Gippsland. We submit to the inquiry that our district does NOT support any form of onshore unconventional gas mining in our area (including coal seam gas, tight gas, shale gas and underground coal gasification) and we call for a complete ban on any such industry in Victoria.

Sustainable Boolarra Group was formed in 2012 following a public meeting to discuss the various mining exploration licences in the area (specifically licences EL 4877, EL 5119, EL 5274, EL 5336, EL 5338 and EL 5428). During 2013 our group conducted an extensive survey of the community to determine existing attitudes towards the possibility of new mining in the area. More than 430 households (representing approximately 75% of all households in the 3870 postcode area) were visited and residents were asked whether they supported new coal and gas mining in the area. Those who expressed a negative view were given an opportunity to sign a survey declaring that they are “against the creation of any new Coal Mines (Open Cut, Underground) or Gas Fields (Coal Seam Gas, Shale Gas, Tight Gas)”. An overwhelming majority of property owners (87%) signed the survey and in doing so declared their property ‘locked’ to these industries. Only 5% of property owners supported new mining whilst the remaining 8% were unsure or had no opinion. (The complete set of survey results and signatures is available for inspection if requested). In May 2014 the community gathered together to declare and celebrate Boolarra as “CSG FREE”. In doing so we joined more than 60 towns across Victoria who have likewise declared themselves coal and gas free. It is clear that there is no social licence for the unconventional extraction of gas in Boolarra and the surrounding district.

There are compelling social and economic reasons why we believe there should be a permanent ban on all forms of unconventional gas extraction in Boolarra and throughout Victoria. Agriculture is an extremely important industry to this area with a number of dairy, cattle and sheep farms as well as fish, fruit and vegetable farms. In particular Boolarra and the nearby town of Mirboo North are known for their quality potatoes. Farming is vital to the area as an employer of people and as a revenue generator. Any threat to the viability of these agricultural industries is of great concern not only to us but should also be to the wider Victorian community. Gippsland produces approximately 25% of the national milk production and is a significant part of the \$9 billion agriculture industry in Victoria. These industries will be threatened by the unconventional gas extraction industry.

Onshore unconventional gas extraction has the possibility of seriously damaging the land and water supplies, both above and below the ground, whether the industry practice of “fracking” (in the case of Coal Seam Gas or Tight gas) is required or not. Evaporation ponds containing the salty brine solution extracted from the gas reservoirs have repeatedly leaked and flooded in Queensland impacting nearby land. Rivers and streams have been polluted with toxic chemicals released both from the gas bed and those used in the extraction process. Wells corrode and/or fail leaching chemicals underground (as has happened in the USA and Queensland), pathways are opened between layers of rock allowing for the movement of underground contaminants and chemicals potentially polluting aquifers that farmers use for water. This damage may be irreversible and reduce the ability of the land to produce high quality beef, dairy, fruit and vegetable products for

generations. In addition the reputation Gippsland currently enjoys as a clean and safe producer of quality foods will be damaged by the gas industry whether or not damage is proven to have occurred. The economic viability of any agricultural industries in our area will therefore suffer and it is possible farmers will go out of business.

In the USA there has been extensive unconventional gas mining for many years and studies there have shown serious threats to safe water supplies. A study completed by the Environment America Research and Policy Center found more than 1,000 cases of water contaminated by dirty drilling processes. Recently in Australia Santos was fined for contaminating underground water supplies during CSG activity in NSW. Economically, our area would be destroyed if the water supply is polluted. The agriculture industry would be completely crippled if the water is contaminated and unsafe, not to mention the impact on all other local businesses and tourism. Given that a safe and secure water supply is a basic human right, the social implications of compromising this supply are astronomical. Whether or not correct industry practices are adhered to accidents can and do happen and there can be no guarantee they won't. The stakes are high when the land is prime agricultural land like ours. Even in the absence of accidents that cause contamination and pollution of water supplies, water availability for farmers would be compromised by the gas industry which requires enormous quantities of clean water during the extraction process. This would likely lower the water table even further than it already has been following offshore oil and gas extraction and onshore coal extraction. With lower rainfall values predicted for the future any additional threat to adequate water supplies must be prevented.

The health risks associated with coal and gas mining are significant and undeniable. The Australian Medical Association has cited concern over the exposure of communities "to pollutants through air and groundwater" and the "associated health risks". These risks could leave communities like ours with huge financial burdens from added health issues. Having to grapple with the ongoing health problems of family and community members caused by mining would be a social burden on such a small, close-knit town.

The social implications of new mining activity include the industrialisation of the rural landscape (drill pads, waste ponds, water treatment plants, flaring pits and pipelines) and the increased volumes of traffic (particularly heavy vehicle truck traffic) on our already often poor quality roads. This will reduce the liveability of our towns, cause greater native wildlife deaths and increased risk of accidents. All of this would reduce the liveability of our district, negatively impacting on residents' wellbeing, lifestyles and land values. In addition the likelihood of a large number of fly-in-fly-out workers whilst benefiting a small number of businesses has had various negative effects on towns in Queensland where the onshore gas industry is well established, including social unrest, distorted rental market prices and displacement of low income families. None of these issues are consistent with the Victorian Government's goal of attracting people to regional areas.

In 2009 Boolarra and the surrounding districts were hit by bushfires that destroyed many houses in the area and then in 2012 we experienced a magnitude 5.3 earthquake. The combination of gas wells and the associated pipe lines in an area of high fire and earthquake risk could prove catastrophic.

It is inconceivable that a Government would allow an industry to damage farmland, water supplies, air quality and peoples' lifestyles particularly when that industry will in all likelihood last less than a generation and provide, at best, short term financial gain for predominantly internationally owned mining companies. Furthermore it is likely that any gas extracted from the area would not be for domestic use but would rather be for export and therefore will have the effect of raising gas prices domestically. Local residents are unlikely to see any benefits at all whilst having to live with higher prices and the likelihood of significant environmental damage for generations. It is hardly surprising that the vast majority are against any onshore gas industry.

We call on the inquiry to recommend that the current moratorium on fracking and the use of the BTEX chemicals be made permanent and the onshore unconventional gas extraction industry be prevented from ever operating in Boolarra and Victoria. Similar bans have been put in place all over the world including various states in the USA (Vermont, New York, Hawaii), the UK (Wales), Europe (including France, Italy and Austria) and more locally in parts of New Zealand and Tasmania. To these people it seems the environment is important and water is a precious resource that should be protected. We urge the committee to consider carefully the possible damage that may be done by any onshore unconventional gas extraction to the land, the water and the communities that live in and sustain the regional areas of Gippsland and wider Victoria. Communities like our own in Boolarra. We call on the committee to recommend to the current state Government a complete ban on any onshore unconventional gas extraction in Victoria.

Sincerely,

Simon McInnes
Sustainable Boolarra Group