

Leon Furze



Keir Delaney
Secretary, Environmental & Planning Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
Melbourne
VIC 3002

04/07/2015

Inquiry into Unconventional Gas Mining in Victoria

I am a resident of Grassdale, near Hamilton, Victoria. I live on my wife's family farm, which has been owned and run by the family since the 1840s. As a member of the local agricultural community, and as a teacher in a school of many students with agricultural backgrounds, I am writing to express my concerns about the potential for Unconventional Gas Mining and Exploration in Victoria.

Water and Land Concerns

There has been insufficient research into the lasting effects of unconventional gas mining on the environment, both in terms of water and land. There is a lack of peer reviewed, independent research particularly into the contamination of aquifers by the chemicals used in the fracking process, or by the damage caused by the unconventional gas mining process. Reports exist of heavy metals leached into water systems, of the fallibility of steel and concrete infrastructure designed to protect aquifers, and of the danger of gas escaping through the water systems. The CSIRO has indicated that water produced by the industry is not safe for human consumption. However, much of this research is buried by industry research and government research that indicates that these mining processes can be successful under heavily regulated circumstances. A major concern is that these mining operations often do not follow regulations, and that research that supports the industry is heavily biased.

Damage to the land environment is evident through both the initial set up of the infrastructure, the operation of the industry itself, and the lasting effects of the industry. Soil contamination, damage to native flora and fauna, air pollution – including from the vehicles used in the industry – and damage to the landscape from infrastructure will greatly outlast the predicted lifespan of the industry. The short term benefits of unconventional gas mining will be far outweighed by the lasting damage to the environment.

Coexistence of Industry with Agricultural Use

There is an argument by some invested parties that land can be used for both the mining industry and agriculture. Since the infrastructure required for this industry is enormous – including roads, compressor stations, and wells - there would be an obvious reduction in usable land for stock and crops, thereby reducing income. Compensation agreements do not seem to match up to this loss. The current arrangement – that a gas mining company can agree to compensate a landowner via VCAT – removes any rights of the landholder to refuse access to their property. This is a serious infringement on a landowner's rights.

The VFF has recently passed a resolution supporting the right to veto. Whilst this is a step in the right direction, there are problems with this approach. The nature of the unconventional gas mining industry means that if a neighbouring property allows access to mining, the damage would not end at the property border. Equally, unknown overseas parties – such as the blue gum plantations - own properties surrounding farms in this area. Whilst the right to veto could protect our farm, the potential for the aforementioned environmental damage still exists.

Adverse Health Effects of the Unconventional Gas Industry

There have been reports from both the US and Australia of the adverse health effects of the unconventional gas mining industry. These include adverse effects of airborne pollutants, such as headaches, nausea, nosebleeds, and even links to cancer and the increase in parts of the US of stillborn infants and increased infant mortality. Again, more independent and peer reviewed research needs to be conducted into these health impacts. Whilst there are many independent reviews into the health effects of renewable energies, such as wind farms, no such research currently exists in Australia into, for example, coal seam gas.

Community Response to Unconventional Gas

There are major concerns that community input into the prospect of unconventional gas mining. The recent Community Report from the government implies that roughly 40% of the community is opposed, with the remainder either for, or unconcerned with unconventional gas mining. These results, however, do not reflect community surveys undertaken by members of the public. Surveys in this region, for example, average a response of 96-98% against the industry. The government survey for the local area took place, unadvertised, during a working day. Those who attended reported that questions were leading, and responses were recorded inadequately.

The importance of realistic, qualitative data from independently conducted community surveys cannot be stressed enough. Whilst reported benefits to communities - such as economic boosts to hospitality industries – may exist, the potential risks and damage to agriculture cannot be ignored. Communities in the UK have banned unconventional gas exploration. Councils across Victoria,

including the local Southern Grampians Shire Council, have indicated their desire to remain gas field free. Any government that refuses to listen to these public and community interests will do so at the risk of losing the support of these communities.

I support a total ban of unconventional gas mining in Victoria. Failing this, I support the VFF's recommendation of a five-year extension to the moratorium on unconventional gas mining, whilst clear, independent and unbiased research is conducted. I cannot imagine that the benefits of unconventional gas mining – to the gas industry, the economy, import/export, or otherwise – can possibly outweigh the damage caused by this industry.

Yours Sincerely,

Leon Furze.