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SUBMISSION TO ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Unconventional gas in Victoria. 30th June 2015

The following is a submission on behalf of the Gippsland Environment Group, GEG. A small but talented, experienced group that has for years been campaigning for the health of the Gippsland Lakes.

The writer is a retired Mechanical, Civil and Municipal engineer with extensive experience in river management and civil engineering construction both in Australia and on Aid projects in PNG, Fiji and Cambodia.

There is much ignorance and denial regarding the current degraded condition of the Gippsland Lakes and little awareness that this condition is directly as a result of the offshore oil and gas industry. Our concern is that at a time when it appears that both State and Federal Governments are cooperating with Ramsar to identify and rehabilitate the degraded ecological condition of the lakes we are faced with the potential of a land based impact from the same industry.

In 2003 East Gippsland Shire received Federal funding to investigate developing Lakes Entrance as a deep sea port. The application stated that they wanted to deepen the entrance from 2.5 metres to 6.0 metres to facilitate the movement of deep draft vessels servicing the offshore oil and gas rigs. A dredging trial of the entrance was permitted in 2008 to a depth of 4.5 metres without an Environmental Effects Statement. Dredging continued in 2009 and 2010 without a permit under the EPBC Act; and in 2011 a permit was issued that allowed dredging to 5.5 metres. Again there was no EES or assessment of the impacts of the dredging 2008 to 2010.

The impact of the deeper entrance has been devastating; with baseline salinity increase and surface water salinity increase impacting on fringing vegetation, shoreline erosion, bivalve; seagrass, sand worm and bream spawning. Post 2008, invasive species entered the lakes; 5 species of shark; stingray; squid ; green European Shore Crab; and a range of marine fish.

SEWPAC have not been accurately briefed on the altered ecological condition of the Gippsland Lakes by the Victorian Government and as a direct result GEG has been forced to communicate with Ramsar and request their support. As a result the Gippsland Lakes site has been listed as one where the Secretariat has received information from a third party, as one where human-induced negative changes have occurred, is occurring or are likely to occur. (Annex 4b, page 47 of Ramsar COP12Doc7) The Federal Department of Environment is currently liaising with the Victorian Government to ascertain the current ecological condition of the Gippsland Lakes.

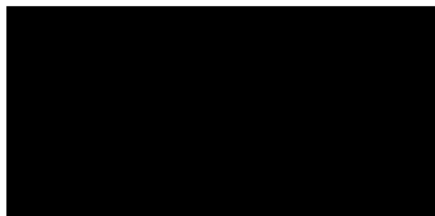
The Panel should be aware that the current exploration licences both overlay the Ramsar listed Gippsland Lakes site, and also run to the headwaters of the lakes catchment at Warragul. The potential for adverse impacts from polluted catchment inflows and polluted aquifers are considerable.

A further and critical consideration is the impact CSG development would have on the long term East Gippsland economy. It does sound simplistic to state that the economy of East Gippsland is based on tourism, and tourism is based on a healthy Gippsland Lakes and the recreational fishing that it supports. We are currently observing fish stocks in the lakes crashing, and visiting recreational fishermen now drive through Bairnsdale and travel further east up the coast. Every effort is currently being made by the new Environment Minister to address this situation with controls and possible buy-outs of professional fishing; investigation into submerged salinity barriers in the lakes, and investigation into mercury levels in lakes' fish. Nature based tourism is a very significant part of the East Gippsland economy, and drilling will industrialise the landscape and impact adversely on the lakes and adjacent areas.

Freshwater inflows to the lakes are now at a critical level with increased demand from a developing Melbourne, Gippsland being developed as a food-hub for Victoria and climate change impacting on rainfall and runoff from the catchment. Shale and tight gas requires large amounts of freshwater and the Latrobe aquifer is already stressed, with its extraction rate far exceeding its natural recharge rate. CSG requires dewatering of coal seams resulting in large quantities of contaminated water which ultimately will discharge to and contaminate the lakes.

In conclusion we would bring the Panel's attention to the subject of Land Ethics. (Leopold) "Preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the land." "Humans would forgo superfluous wants and would be satisfied by aesthetic and spiritual benefits of living in a whole and healthy community".

The Gippsland Environment Group does not support UCG drilling.



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