

SUBMISSION ON ONSHORE UNCONVENTIONAL GAS

Perusal of information on the extraction of unconventional gas elsewhere in Australia and overseas leads me to the opinion that any potential benefits of undertaking such activity in Victoria can never outweigh the risks.

Indeed, I find it surprising that the Committee's Terms of Reference include only "potential risks" rather than "disadvantages" to set against benefits, since a "risk" implies uncertainty whereas many deleterious effects are certain and inevitable.

These deleterious effects include the construction of numerous wells, ponds and roads on land that is currently either used for agriculture or under native vegetation. As well as the loss of the actual land thus occupied – which may be considerable – the roads will interfere with agricultural activities in the case of farmland, and in the case of native vegetation will cause further fragmentation of species that have been already isolated by extensive clearing. That the noise and lights associated with the operations, and with the movement of trucks, will disturb both human and animal inhabitants may perhaps be called a "risk" but is also surely a certainty.

When it comes to the chemicals used in the extraction process and the dangers posed by the leakage of these, or of the gas itself, into the watertable, surface runoff, or the atmosphere, I concede that we are speaking of risk rather than certainty; however, I consider that the level of risk is unacceptable. One might hope that the Victorian Government would not contemplate allowing any activities without imposing strict regulations to guard against such leakages, and that they would employ regular inspectors to ensure that the regulations were adhered to. One might also hope, though with even less confidence, that the companies involved would not attempt to skimp on precautions in order to save money. But even with the strictest precautions, it is inevitable that accidents will occur owing to human error, as recent industrial accidents, both in Victoria and overseas, have shown.

The parts of Victoria that could be subject to this activity include areas of rich agricultural land and bushland of high biodiversity. "Rehabilitation" after the gas supplies were exhausted might possibly restore the former (assuming no accidents, and that the companies concerned do not avoid their responsibilities via legal loopholes or bankruptcy), but can certainly never restore the latter.

If land is to be alienated from agricultural or environmental uses in order to produce energy, then surely it would be preferable to devote it to the production of renewable energy rather than to the short-term extraction of a fossil fuel that will contribute to emissions of greenhouse gases. Admittedly there are some environmental and nuisance concerns associated with wind-farms and solar arrays, depending on how they are designed and where they are sited. However, the problems that have arisen from wind-farms, for example, will be as nothing compared to the problems that would be caused by extensive gas fields.

Finally, it seems that much of the gas that would be extracted would be exported rather than used locally, which raises the questions of whether the energy is required for Victoria, and whether any financial benefit would accrue to Victorians.

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