

Malcolm Rowe
Manager, Murroa Angus



16 July 2015

The Secretary
Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Secretary

Please accept my late submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Unconventional Onshore Gas.

Background

I am a Bachelor of Natural Resources graduate from the University of New England, and have specialised in soil and water resources. I have spent the last 30 years working mostly in land and water management positions in New South Wales and Victoria. For the last 12 years I have been producing prime lamb and premium beef for domestic and export markets from two farms near Hamilton in western Victoria. One is my own farm (120 ha) and the other is one that I manage for the descendants of the family who purchased it in 1886 (2,300 ha). I consider myself a fourth generation farmer.

Both my farm and the farm I manage are overlain by gas exploration licences held by Beach Energy and Lakes Oil. I have been in contact with Nick Dunstan, the Community Liaison Officer of Beach Energy and Bob Annells, the Chairman of Lakes Oil. In both instances, I have sought information regarding what options I have as a land owner and land manager, and I have subsequently expressed my concerns and opposition to both men. Neither of them have been able to convince me to think any differently. I feel that my rights and interests will not be best served by the existing compensation, regulation and access options, should these companies choose to develop their mining interests.

Further to this, I have contacted a hydrogeologist from Southern Rural Water for information on the geology of this region, including detail on the various groundwater aquifers, and the prospectiveness of gas reserves. I am not convinced that the development of an unconventional onshore gas industry in this region will result in the unsubstantiated economic benefits that have been lauded by those who support the industry.

I consider myself to be well-informed and am opposed to an unconventional onshore gas industry being developed in south west Victoria.

Quality Assurance

In the production of prime lamb and premium beef products, we voluntarily subscribe to a number of industry accepted, regularly audited quality assurance programs which ensure that our animals are at all times managed optimally, are free of disease, free of contaminants and free of growth promotants. These programs include CattleCare and FlockCare, the European Union Cattle Accreditation Scheme, JBS Quality Assurance Program, and Meat and Livestock Australia's Livestock

Production Assurance scheme for meat safety and traceability. These programs set an extremely high benchmark for our production systems.

Our prime lamb cuts are sold mostly through Coles supermarkets, and our premium beef ends up in high-end restaurants in Japan. We have developed long-term, trusted and respected relationships with industry-leading processors who are confident that our products will meet their expectations. For this, they pay us a premium. We also breed and sell seedstock animals to other producers.

Our operation is based fundamentally on good animal welfare, and we do everything we can to ensure that animals are well fed, well watered, have sufficient shade and shelter and are handled consistently within a low-stress operating environment. We know that they won't produce a specialty product under sub-standard management.

In addition to this we have fenced off waterways, established off-stream livestock watering systems and planted hundreds of thousands of native trees in order to establish shelter and wildlife corridors to re-connect fragmented islands of remnant native vegetation. We border 13,000 ha of state park, which includes the unique volcanic and lava-flow ecosystems of Mt Napier.

What I am trying to establish here, is that while we exist in a rich agricultural environment and produce high quality agricultural products, we do it in sympathy with the natural landscapes and ecosystems that surround us. Our efforts are always targeted at revitalising the natural environment, rather than diminishing it.

From what I have learned over the last couple of years, I am not convinced that the development of an unconventional onshore gas industry would commit to the same.

Concerns

Water – contamination of ground and surface water supplies from mining operations, well failure and hydraulic fracturing, and the secondary impact this would have on livestock production systems

Biodiversity – further fragmentation of important remnant native vegetation and ecological habitat from pipelines, well pads and gasfield access tracks and the impact that this would undoubtedly have on threatened species resilience

Community – the potential is huge to disrupt established community and neighbourly relationships

Air Quality – including dust during construction and ongoing, unconstrained fugitive greenhouse gas emissions

Peacefulness – including noise and increased traffic

Road Damage – increased heavy truck movements in a high rainfall climate will trash already crumbling roads, many of which are not yet sealed

Industrialisation of the landscape – south west Victoria is a highly desirable place to live, and in the next 20-30 years, many residents from other parts of the state and country will increasingly choose to reside here due to the natural and rural landscapes; it is unlikely that they would choose to live in a gasfield

Indigenous considerations – including World Heritage listed Condah Swamp with its links to unique permanent settlement and occupation by the Guditjmarra people

Other issues of National and International significance – such as the pending listing of the Lower Glenelg River Estuary as a RAMSAR wetland, the establishment of the Discovery Bay Marine Park fish nursery and the Glenelg River National Park, all unique places with direct linkages to ground and water resources

There are many concerns, and I am not convinced that current State and Commonwealth regulations are sufficient to protect them in the instance that something goes wrong. Evidence is clear that things do go wrong in the unconventional gas industry. We are here for the long term. Agriculture – that is, food production – is here for the long term. We cannot jeopardize that. Agriculture employs so many more people than the gas mining industry does – people who settle in the community and establish families, rather than fly-in-fly-out workers. Agriculture provides ever so much more income and economic activity than a short-term gas industry would, and it does so – year after year after year after year.

I urge the inquiry to think longer term.

I urge the inquiry to carefully consider where the demand for gas is heading, and the limited significance of the gas reserves in south west Victoria, compared with the other reserves across Australia.

I urge the inquiry to carefully consider the speed at which renewable energy resources are being developed, and how the reliance on fossil fuels will diminish significantly in the next decade.

I selfishly urge the inquiry to carefully consider the impact an unconventional onshore gas mining industry would have on my prime lamb and beef production business, and the business I manage for others.

I sincerely urge the inquiry to consider the consequences of things going wrong, at depth, and who will take responsibility for reparative works – this year, next year, the year after that, and for ever... which is a very, very, very long time to manage those consequences.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Rowe

