

Submission to the Unconventional Gas Inquiry
Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament of Victoria

John & Leanne Hanrahan
[REDACTED]

10 July 2015

As the owners of a rural property in the Bass Coast Shire we are very concerned about the potential impact of further development of unconventional gas within the Bass Coast and South Gippsland Shires. We believe strongly that the risks of such activity in this area far outweigh any potential economic benefit to Victoria. For this reason, we believe that an extension of the current moratorium on the further development of unconventional gas in Victoria is the most prudent and responsible course of action at this point in time.

Our opposition to the development of unconventional gas is fourfold:

Firstly, the development of unconventional gas will come at the expense of future food production.

The Bass Coast and South Gippsland Shires contain some of the most productive agricultural land in Australia with plentiful and reliable rainfall. Australia's population is increasing rapidly and climate modelling suggests that agricultural land in northern Victoria will become less reliable and productive in years to come. Cared for properly, agricultural land in Gippsland will continue to feed Victorians for countless generations to come. Farmers, unlike miners, have a vested interest in caring for the land and ensuring its long term viability. Miners have no interest in the long term viability of the land. They seek only to maximise short-term profits by extracting a finite resource at the lowest possible cost and selling it into a global market at the highest possible price before moving on to the next project.

The specially designated Farming Zone planning scheme, which covers most of the Bass Coast and South Gippsland Shires, restricts many activities in these areas with the explicit aim of protecting them for agriculture. The planning scheme sets down a number of conditions against which any potential land use should be assessed, including:

- Whether the site is suitable for the use or development and whether the proposal is compatible with adjoining and nearby land uses.
- Whether the use or development will support and enhance agricultural production.
- Whether the use or development will adversely affect soil quality or permanently remove land from agricultural production.
- The potential for the use or development to limit the operation and expansion of adjoining and nearby agricultural uses.
- The impact of the proposal on the natural physical features and resources of the area, in particular on soil and water quality.
- The impact of the use or development on the flora and fauna on the site and its surrounds.
- The need to protect and enhance the biodiversity of the area, including the retention of vegetation and faunal habitat and the need to revegetate land including riparian buffers along waterways, gullies, ridgelines, property boundaries and saline discharge and recharge area.

The development of unconventional gas, with its associated environmental risks and fixed above-ground infrastructure, would fail any reasonable assessment against all of these conditions.

Secondly, the development of unconventional gas poses unacceptable short term risks to the environment and local residents. Despite the many assurances from mining companies world-wide of their impeccable risk management procedures and environmental controls, “accidents” do happen. The effect on the local community and environment of a mining accident in an area as densely populated and agriculturally reliant as Gippsland would be potentially catastrophic. Gas escapes, above or below ground, or contamination of productive land or waterways from flow-back or Produced Water would do serious damage to other activities in the region for years to come. There is simply not enough evidence yet to demonstrate that the mining companies can operate unconventional gas wells with zero risk to the surrounding communities. In fact the industry’s track record in the United States and even New South Wales suggests quite the opposite. While the likelihood of an accident may be reduced through controls and regulation, the consequences for the local area are potentially catastrophic, long term and irreversible.

Thirdly, the long term consequences of drilling for unconventional gas are uncertain and irreversible. We draw the Committee’s attention to the excellent submission from Dr Matthew Currell, Lecturer, Hydrogeology & Environmental Engineering at RMIT University; specifically to Dr Currell’s information regarding the geology of the region, “...target rocks for gas development occur underneath significant water supply aquifers ... These aquifers provide important sources of water for agriculture and domestic use ... the degree of separation between the gas bearing rocks ... and productive aquifers ... can be quite limited (on the order of 100s of meters).”

The South Gippsland area has been identified by Geoscience Australia as one of the most seismically active areas in Victoria and experiences frequent earth tremors. In 100 years, when the CSG is gone and the spent wells are capped, can the Committee guarantee that the concrete and steel well-plugs, travelling through numerous geological layers, will not fail through corrosion and seismic activity? Should these well-plugs fail in the future, leaving a “Swiss cheese” of penetrations through the geological layers, what will be the implications for these vital aquifers and for future agriculture and human habitation in the region?

Fourthly, any economic benefit to Victorian is likely to be marginal and short-term. Australia already has ample supplies of natural gas, much of which is currently exported. Any addition to the gas supply derived from unconventional gas development in Victoria will be very small in the global sense and, therefore, unlikely to alter the price or supply certainty for Victorian households and industry in the foreseeable future. In addition to this, demand for fossil fuels in Australia and around the world is falling as renewables become mainstream. This trend is likely to continue to increase as the cost effectiveness of PV solar improves. Given the potential long term environmental risks associated with the development of unconventional gas, where is the compelling case at this time for literally “betting the farm”?

In conclusion, we believe that the Committee, and the Parliament of Victoria, are faced with a decision on where Victoria’s priorities lie. Should Victoria continue to build and protect its clean, efficient highly productive and sustainable agricultural industries or should it put all of that at risk for short term gain? In our view, the appropriate course of action is to extend the current moratorium on the further development of unconventional gas in Victoria.