

Opposition to coal seam gas mining hot up Information night in South Grafton. 30th March, 2012

The Clarence Environment Centre joined with the recently-formed Clarence Alliance Against Coal Seam Gas group, in hosting an information night on the contentious coal seam gas issue in South Grafton on Friday March 30.

The aim of the evening, which was organised by Seanine Cooper and her Alliance team, was to inform the community about the gas mining and exploration activities that are already under way north of the Clarence Valley in the Casino – Lismore areas, with plans by at least three mining companies to expand south to the Clarence River and beyond.

An audience separately estimated to number between two and three hundred were addressed by a series of speakers, introduced by Ian Gailard from the Keerong Valley where considerable coal seam gas exploration is already occurring.

The first speaker was one of the founders and current President of the "Lock the Gate" movement, Drew Hutton, who emphasised the enormous threat that the Clarence Valley is facing as the coal seam gas miners move into this area. Hutton said that because of the attitude of governments, the CSG miners believed they were going to get a free ride. However, the growing community opposition should be showing them it was not going to be as easy as they thought.



He described the coal seam gas industry as ***“the greatest threat to rural Australia, and probably the most radical transformation of rural Australia since the pastoral expansion of the 19th century”***. He spoke with passion about the estimated 80,000 coal seam gas wells that are expected to be installed across rural Queensland, turning the landscape into something resembling a pincushion of well heads connected by a network of roads and pipelines, with toxic waste holding ponds, and noisy fracking equipment, heavy machinery, trucks, and reverse osmosis water treatment plants.

This description is a far cry from from the industry's highly misleading television advertising claiming a gas well takes up less than the size of a tennis court.



The image at left is probably from the USA, where shale gas mining has caused major environmental damage. The local industry is quick to distance itself from what has happened in the US, claiming coal seam is different.

However, the image below is from Chinchilla on Queensland's Darling Downs, one of Australia's most productive agricultural areas.

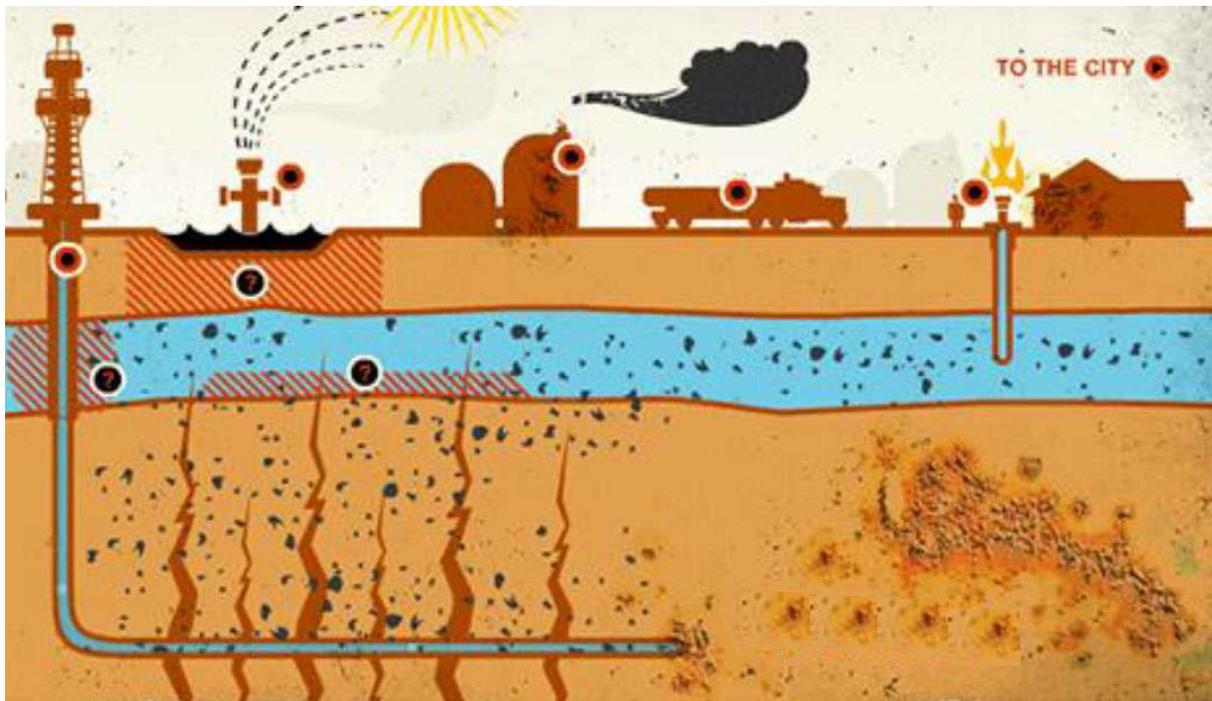


Clearly we should not be distracted by the tennis court claims, and Drew spoke at length on the destruction of one of Australia's best known food bowls where, not only is this coal seam gas extraction occurring, but another 22 massive open-cut coal mines are being proposed. The consequence of this, he explains *“will be the most radical change to the landscape that we will see in our lifetimes”*.

His final advice to those landowners opposed to coal seam gas mining on their properties, – **talk to your neighbours, get together, and lock your gates,** and if possible get all landowners to agree to **lock the road to coal seam gas miners, and declare entire areas off limits.** Of course, the law is still on the side of the mining industry but, as Drew explained, this sends a clear message to miners and the government, that the people do not want this filthy industry on their land.

The second speaker, Clarence Environment Centre member, and Greens representative, Janet Cavanaugh, spoke about some of the major issues with CSG mining that are of community concern. These included:

- **Water issues** – disposal of "produced" water pumped from wells; the risk to aquifers either through contamination by chemicals pumped into wells or through disruption or depletion.



A graphic to show the impact of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) which breaks apart rock seams to release the gas. This image shows how fugitive emissions can leak into aquifers and ground water, and also escaping to the surface.

- **Land use impacts** – changes to rural landscapes as a result of mining infrastructure (e.g. roads, pipelines, holding ponds); depreciation of land values, clearing of vegetation and erosion impacts; noise from pumps, trucks and other activities, and disruption of day to day life by industrial activities.
- **Carbon emissions** – industry claims that CSG is more carbon-friendly than coal do not take into consideration the whole of life impact of this energy source from.
- **Weak regulation in NSW** – little opportunity for community input on mining proposals; very low returns to the state (which in reality is the people of the state), because the State Government has allowed a five year royalty free period of a well's production and a gradual increase over the next five years.
- **What is happening to the gas** – it is mostly for export. It will not provide energy for local homes and businesses, but will be burned overseas and add to atmospheric pollution and rampant global warming and climate change.

The third speaker was Brian Monk, a Queensland farmer from the Tara area near Chinchilla, described himself as a CSG refugee, and spoke of his experience with CSG. One of his major concerns was the poisoning of groundwater with chemicals, which resulted in his grandchildren receiving welts on their skin after bathing.

He was highly critical of Queensland's regulators to effectively implement the regulations controlling the CSG industry. His sobering reflections prompted one member of the audience to comment that it sounded like a tale from the third world.

Brian and his family, who own a sizable property, have thus far refused to negotiate with the mining companies and have not bowed to threats of forced arbitration or mediation, and believes that the mining companies are not game to take landowners to court for fear of losing, and setting a major precedent.

Brian's graphic description of what constitutes a gas field, its multiple well heads, the network of roads and pipelines, the large evaporation ponds of toxic produced water, and excessively noisy reverse osmosis water treatment plants running 24/7, the dust and the chemical smell of methane that permeates everything, matched Drew Hutton's, and something he, for one, could no longer subject his family to.

Sue Higginson, Senior Solicitor from the Environmental Defenders Office in Lismore, spoke about property rights and other legal issues relating to mining exploration and production.



From left to right, answering questions from the floor - Drew Hutton, Brian Monk, Sue Higginson, and Janet Cavanagh.

She admitted that, when it comes to mining on their properties, she could cover the subject of landowner rights in about 2 minutes, but that she was prepared to drag it out for her allotted 15 minutes.

Essentially, what she was saying was that landowners have very few rights. They do have the right to be consulted before allowing miners onto the land, but a refusal to grant access could result in a court order against them. Landowners have a right to compensation, which they have to negotiate, and while the amount of compensation is supposed to be kept confidential, the amount on offer is generally only about \$5,000 per well.

As a lawyer, Sue was clearly frustrated with the lack of regulation of all aspects of mining. However, also as a lawyer, her advice was to get legal advice in the first instance, which the mining company can be expected to pay for, and then negotiate the very best deal possible, which could include new fences, gates, roads, and other peripheral items.

Clearly, she could not recommend locking the gate and refusing access to people's land, because under the current law, that would be illegal, and landowners would then find themselves in court.

An unscheduled speaker on the night was local Aboriginal Land Council spokesman, Brett Tibbet, who felt a need to set the record straight over a controversial move by the State's central Land Council to acquire mining exploration leases over a large area of northern NSW, apparently in partnership with an undisclosed party. Brett was highly critical of that move, and made it clear that the local land councils were opposed to coal seam gas mining and had not been consulted over the decision.

In closing, we congratulate Seanine and her team for the successful organisation of the event, and thank all those, the Environment Centre film crew, merchandise and raffle ticket sellers, for their great work on the night. And finally a word of appreciation to all the speakers who travelled large distances and gave freely of their time to give us a clear insight on what we are about to experience.

The fight is now up to us, but we can rest assured we are not alone. Communities all across the eastern states are rising up and joining together in what we believe will be the fight of our lives.

There have been proposals for petitions, all calling for various safeguards to be put in place, and the Lock the Gate movement itself has been calling for a moratorium pending independent scientific studies proving that the mining processes are safe.

Breaking that tradition, the Northern Rivers anti-gas movement is currently calling on Government to ban all coal seam gas mining in their region. The Clarence Environment Centre supports this view, and has compiled the following supporting statement.

In relation to coal seam gas mining, the mining companies concerned:

- cannot guarantee that groundwater will not become polluted,
- cannot guarantee that aquifers will not be destroyed or diverted,
- cannot guarantee that wells can be sealed to prevent methane leaks during or after use,
- cannot guarantee that fugitive emissions will not create a fire hazard,
- cannot guarantee that emissions will not have detrimental impacts on human health,
- cannot guarantee that, in high rainfall areas, toxic waste water will not escape into waterways,
- cannot guarantee that toxic waste water will not leak into groundwater

All the above have been recorded in Queensland, and some have been recorded in our region.



Also coal seam gas mining:

- will have detrimental impacts on threatened species, and endangered ecological communities,
 - will cause massive fragmentation of native bushland and wildlife habitat,
 - will force unacceptable impacts on landowners and their neighbours through, noise, dust and smells, leading to social disruption, and physical and psychological health impacts.
 - will create downward pressure on land prices, both in the short and long term,
- will disrupt and divide communities,
 - will use high volumes of sometimes scarce water resources,
 - will create unacceptable greenhouse gas emissions during the exploration, extraction, transportation and refining processes.
 - will impact on roads and bridges,
 - will, through increased traffic volumes, have negative road safety implications,
 - will put significant pressure on public waste disposal facilities
 - will not provide a single cent in royalties to the people for the first 5 years of a well's operation,
 - will not provide full royalties until after 10 years of a well's operation,
 - has been linked with increased seismic activity,

In the bigger picture

The burning of coal seam gas contributes to global warming through greenhouse gas emissions.

The International Energy Agency has identified (IEA Outlook 2012) that, by continuing business as usual, the world is currently on track for 6 degrees warming by 2100.

The Australian Government's Energy White Paper, January 2012, identifies that coal and gas exports are set to rise for the foreseeable future. i.e. business as usual. The NSW Government has walked away from its 20% renewable energy target by 2020, and appears likely to approve a 4th coal loading facility at Newcastle, to facilitate dozens of proposed new coal mines across the State.

The explosion of natural gas and coal seam gas operations across Australia has prompted the White Paper to boast that Australia, already the world's largest exporter of coal, will soon rise to be the world's second largest exporter of liquefied gas.

The burning of that coal and gas will lead to catastrophic levels of climate change yet, despite being made fully aware of the consequences of burning those fossil fuels, the Australian Federal and State Governments continue their reckless course regardless.

We fully support the British “Eradicate Ecocide” movement's assertion to the United Nations that: *“Not one Member State can justify putting humanity at risk when the whole of civilisation stands on the brink of disaster”*.

Given all of the above, we strongly believe that coal seam gas mining cannot be justified under any circumstances and must be stopped.



Keep our environment pristine.

Compiled by John Edwards
Honorary Secretary
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