

14 March 2016

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Unconventional Gas Mining
P.O. BOX 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members,

My submission relates chiefly to the following Terms of Reference :

A. The health, social, business, agricultural, environmental, landholder and economic impacts of unconventional gas mining

B. Government and non Government services and assistance for those affected

Following is a copy of my submission to a previous Senate Select Committee (dated November 2014). It relates to social impacts on my town of Chinchilla due to the incursion of Coal Seam Gas mining. I have included it as the crux of my submission as it remains relevant and covers most of the points that I would like to make.

I would like to advise the Committee about failures by the Queensland Government to properly assess, monitor and address impacts of the Coal Seam Gas industry on people and communities.

I am a resident of Chinchilla, and as such, have found myself to be now living in an industrialised landscape, the scale of which has never before been seen in any residential and agricultural region of Queensland.

The transition from an agricultural/ primary industry based community into a mining community has revealed major flaws in the process overseen by the Queensland Government. These flaws have serious implications for residents, as outlined below.

HOUSING

Sky rocketing rents (during the construction phase) forced out many permanent, long term residents.

Pensioners, retirees, sole parents, single income families and non-industry workers left the town in droves. They will not return. Young children, (were) living in tents at the showground in the midst of a very chilly winter was something previously unseen in this town. Lack of Public Housing contributed to this situation.

Those of us fortunate enough to own our own homes have been subject to crippling increases in our Western Downs Regional Council rates. In just five years my rates have risen from \$1083 to \$2011. Unimproved land valuation increased from \$58,000 to \$182,500. This is despite no expenditure by Council in the form of kerbing and channelling or improvements of any kind.

The demand for new and investment housing resulted in 'pop-up' housing estates, constructed before adequate infrastructure, such as storm water drains, were in place. This directly resulted in flooding of long established properties where flooding had never been an issue. Many of the new houses developed slab cracks and structural damage within two years of construction, putting into question the quality control and signing off on building regulations.

TRAFFIC

A huge increase in the regions' traffic, especially by heavy vehicles, impacted our local roads, not just in wear and tear, but also in the road toll and road trauma rate. I believe the statistical rise is unmatched anywhere in Australia.

With the traffic increase came a phenomenal rise in roadside litter. Council and/or Main Roads seem unable to restore this eyesore to a pre-industry standard.

CRIME RATE

The population of the town, including surrounding 'worker camps' more than tripled, yet policing numbers did not reflect this. The rise in assaults, alcohol and drug related incidents, thefts, vandalism, break and enters and traffic incidents have had a negative impact. Our police station throughout the significant 'boom' period remained opened only part-time hours. Their very recent upgrade, along with staffing resources, came years too late.

Other government services have proved to be under-resourced and inadequate to service the population. This includes the court house, hospital and mental health facilities.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Community consultation has been almost non-existent and inadequate.

Example – In July 2013, QGC and Sunwater hosted a public information session about the Kenya to Chinchilla Weir Pipeline Project. This project facilitates the treatment of toxic wastewater from CSG operations. The so-called 'beneficial' water, after treatment through a reverse osmosis plant, is piped into the Chinchilla weir, our town water supply. Some primary producers were also mooted to receive 'beneficial water'. I was curious about a number of details about this process. 'How will the company ensure that all naturally occurring radioactive substances be removed?' 'How will it address low molecular weight chemicals unable to be treated effectively by reverse osmosis?' 'What will the company do with the many tonnes of contaminated salt produced, when the company representative has said that dumping of salt will be a last resort?'

These, and many more questions, could not be answered by their senior chemist or the General Manager for Water Development present that day. Their response by email, after some prodding, came four weeks later and could only be described as manifestly inadequate. My concerns about this process have not been allayed.

This 'produced water' is now added to our town water and is used on some cropping locally.

HEALTH ISSUES

It has been deeply disturbing to hear and witness the distress of those residents who now find themselves in close proximity of gas field infrastructure. The response of QHealth, in particular, to their repeated calls for help, has been nothing short of shameful. To this day, not one official has attended the residences of those affected, nor have undertaken a serious and thorough investigation.

Dr GERALYN McCARRON, a Brisbane based GP, has undertaken a health survey of the affected families. Clearly, there are pollution issues which have resulted in contamination of rain water tanks on which those residents rely.

Fundraising groups responded by purchasing bottled water to supply those families, particularly those with young children experiencing serious symptoms and frequent hospitalisations. Often children have been airlifted to Brisbane for medical attention.

Mercifully, some of those families have recently been 'bought out' by gas companies, and have left the region. Not one person should be subject to the health impacts endured, as these residents have been. No one should be deprived of the 'quiet enjoyment' in their place of residence.

SUMMARY

Clearly, there has been a lack of engagement, communication and information from government with regards to future impacts on families, communities, local economy and social fabric prior to industry commencement. There has been no benchmark, baseline testing of waterways, noise, vibration, light, atmosphere or drinking water tanks.

The responsibility of testing has been left to individuals.

The government has failed in its duty to maintain and monitor Public Health standards. I respectfully request that a full, proper and thorough investigation into all aspects of the Coal Seam Gas industry be instigated in the form of a Royal Commission.

I can only add to this, that since the construction bubble has burst, the town has been left reeling with high unemployment, inadequate infrastructure and services, still rising Council rate costs, plummeting land valuations, a glut of vacant rental properties, spiking crime rates and struggling local businesses.

The abrupt change of demographic is mostly due to the real estate crash and the large number of rental vacancies, with recommendations from Centrelink and other such agencies in coastal and interstate cities that Chinchilla is now attractive for welfare recipients and parolees.

This influx has seen our Police and Court services stretched as the issues of domestic violence, drug use/ offences and property thefts have reached levels previously unheard of in our once quiet and safe town.

Despite a huge increase in demand for appropriate government services, these have actually been downgraded to fewer than pre-boom levels. For example, Centrelink now has only one staff member with the office closing at 12.30 pm daily. We now have not a single Disability Support worker for the entire region. Mental Health and drug/ alcohol services are almost zero.

Families that are heavily impacted by their misfortune to live in proximity to gas infrastructure find their physical and mental health worsening with each passing week.

The response from Government has been nothing short of token and indeed appalling.

I would strongly suggest that Governments consider their culpability and revisit their knowledge of Human Rights issues.



In the meantime, I will continue to do what I have been doing for the past two years - organising delivery of clean drinking water to households that now have contaminated rainwater tanks.

This is the stuff of third world countries.

Regards

Karen Auty