



Caldera Environment Centre Inc.

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
(Submitted online)

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Dear madam or sir

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AMENDMENT BILL 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to submit the views of the Caldera Environment Centre (CEC) in relation to the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment Bill 2013*.

The Caldera Environment Centre is located in Murwillumbah on the Far North Coast of NSW, and its membership extends across the Northern Rivers region. The CEC has consistently opposed coal seam gas (CSG) exploration in the Northern Rivers for reasons outlined below.

Environmental

Scientific investigation of the potential impacts of CSG and other unconventional gas mining activities is inadequate; there simply have not been sufficient independent scientific studies to form a view on the risks these activities pose for the natural environment. Further, while they are currently unquantified, the scale of the environmental damage that could arise from a serious accident – including very serious air and water pollution and (as recent research conducted by the Southern Cross University demonstrates), significant contributions to the phenomena of climate change – are so appalling that they should, at very least, warrant a very cautious approach; very unlike the cavalier approach that has been taken to-date.

The risks to water are the most relevant to this inquiry, and are potentially the most immediate and grave – for the beautiful Northern Rivers region, but equally elsewhere – and remediation of a serious water pollution event is potentially beyond the capacity of the current *generation* to address. At a point in history when water scarcity is touted as a likely source for serious conflict and even wars, and in a country that exists upon the driest continent on Earth, it is immensely foolish to be permitting CSG mining or any other activity that potentially threatens water security.

Food security

CSG mining can diminish the productivity of arable land, and not only the land upon which

the wells are sited, but surrounding land as well, particularly in instances where bordering properties rely on common water sources. Only ideologues will argue that this will have a positive or neutral effect on food production; any reasonable assessment of the situation will yield the conclusion that CSG mining undermines our country's capacity to feed itself.

When these activities are contrasted against the background of imminent and serious food shortages (food security has been identified as one of the key threats to global harmony in the 21st century), it is clear that facilitating activities which degrade arable land and reduce agricultural yields is lunacy; in the nature of suicide. It is worth noting that the life of the gas wells that may ultimately result from this exploration application extend well into the timeframes within which food shortages are expected to become critical.

Social (the Northern Rivers' experience)

Until recently, the Northern Rivers was host to several protracted community-supported blockades and other popular actions aimed at stopping CSG exploration in the region. While the actions have proven successful, indirectly resulting in the suspension of activities by the main industry protagonist in our region – Metgasco – they have taken a very serious toll on the people of the Northern Rivers. Large numbers of arrests, brutality and the provocative exercise of powers by Police, and expressions of vitriol or indifference by responsible NSW Government Ministers have, until recently, been typical of the responses by state government to the massive and peaceful opposition to CSG mining activities.

While any future attempts to impose CSG exploration or production on the Northern Rivers would be met with equally vigorous opposition, the CEC is hopeful that the traumas of past months will not have to be revisited, and that the current Senate Inquiry will result in strengthened protections for the natural environment and the people whose lives depend on its health. To this end, the CEC welcomes the prompt passage through Senate of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment Bill 2013*.

Specific observations with respect to the Bill

Consistent with the positions of other community based groups serving the interests of the natural environment and the people of the Northern Rivers, the CEC applauds the recent passage of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment Bill 2013* through the House of Representatives, and looks forward to its prompt passage through the Senate.

In particular, the CEC is pleased that the bilateral approval provisions of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the Act) cannot apply to coal and coal seam gas developments that impact on water resources, and that there have been some improvements to the exemptions. (On the matter of exemptions, the CEC is strongly of the view that they should be minimised or absent from the Bill altogether, and that key projects, such as the Arrow Coal Seam Gas project in Qld and Camden in western Sydney, should not be exempt from the provisions of the revised Act.)

While the CEC is strongly of the view that the Bill should be passed into law immediately, the following deficiencies should be identified for remedy by future amendments to the Act:

- The Act's provisions must be extended to include all unconventional gas mining, including shale gas and tight gas, and unconventional coal mining;
- The Independent Expert Scientific Committee (IESC) should be central to the

decision-making process, and its role should be strengthened;

- Criteria defining significant impacts on water resources should be developed and made explicit in the Act; these criteria should ensure that our aquifers and groundwaters are neither polluted nor drawn upon unsustainably (CSG mining activities entail the risk of both);
- The evidence and issues that must be considered by the Minister before making a decision relating to water resource impacts should be made explicit in the Act;
- There should be a requirement for independent bioregional assessments prior to a project approval.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the CEC to the current Senate Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Christopher J. Aitchison
Secretary
Caldera Environment Centre