

13 August 2021
Answers to Questions on Notice

Joni Wilson:

Senator McMAHON: Do you have any actual evidence—any proof or any scientific evidence—that any of this oil and gas activity is actually going to produce any poison or that any kind of poison is going to spread through the land or the water?

Ms Wilson: It's just common sense to know that this industry has a lot of risk factors. With chemicals, it's just common sense. Science, chemicals, water—we don't want chemicals with water; it's just common sense. You don't have to go to school for that.

CHAIR: Ms Wilson, you can take questions on notice. If you prefer to answer that question in writing, so that you can understand what Senator McMahon is clearly asking for, you have every right to do that.

Senator McMAHON: Yes, Ms Wilson. With all due respect, we're not talking about common sense; we're actually talking about scientific evidence. I'm asking you if you are relying on scientific evidence or not. If you do have proof and evidence, would you be prepared to provide that?

Ms Wilson: I could give proof and evidence. Yes, I can provide it if you mob are asking for that.

Senator McMAHON: Yes, please.

Ms Wilson: Not a problem. Later on, in the future, I can give you that.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide further information about the risks of fracking chemicals with water on Country. I note that recommendations 7.1 to 7.20 of the Pepper Inquiry, relating to water quantity and quality, have not yet been implemented - for example Recommendation 7.4 "That the Government develops specific guidelines for human health and environmental risk assessments for all onshore shale gas developments consistent with the National Chemicals Risk Assessment framework, including the national guidance manual for human and environmental risk assessment for chemicals associated with CSG extraction."¹ The \$50 million Federal Government grants are proceeding without guidelines or protections for water.

We know that many of the findings relating to water are viewed by scientists to be much too "optimistic" and calling for decision-makers "to be much more realistic and mindful of examples [of contamination] like PFAS, like McArthur River Mine, Rum Jungle and Red Bank Copper Mine."²

I also draw the Committee's attention to the following paragraphs from GetUp submission:

Water - Dreaming and Songlines

The Government's proposal would give \$50 million in public money to fracking corporations to drill across the Northern Territory, destroying water, land, and cultural heritage.

Many Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory have water contamination levels above national guidelines.³ The Gunner Government's promised industry

¹ <https://frackinginquiry.nt.gov.au/inquiry-reports?a=494327>

²

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-27/scientists-question-nt-fracking-inquiry-environmental-finding-s/9345710>

³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-22/water-issues-remote-aboriginal-communities-nt-government/100086824>

regulations to mitigate any risk to water have still not been implemented.⁴ And last year's leaked Manufacturing Taskforce Report from the National Covid-19 Coordination Commission ('NCCC') indicated that under the Morrison Government's plan, these regulations will remain un-implemented.⁵

Origin Energy's own environmental report for 10,000 square kilometres on the Beetaloo Basin warned that drilling "would pose a risk of causing aquifers under some properties to leak into each other", deteriorating the quality of existing and future groundwater supplies.⁶ The current program at Beetaloo will be an enormous threat to 90% of the Northern Territory's groundwater systems.⁷ The ecosystem in the outback is fragile and precious. Drilling will have unknown consequences for Traditional Owners, for flora, fauna and farmers.

From a Western worldview, you can play with geography and the environment on a topographical map and reprint the new version on the map the next day, but for the Traditional Owners of this land, if you disrupt the geography and the environment, the songlines are lost forever. In that same powerful letter, the Traditional Owners of Beetaloo have said:

We know our country. We read it, we understand it, and we alone speak for it and its songlines. It is our birthright - handed down by bloodline.

Together, we fight for it...

Giving \$50 million to mining corporations for an 'economic recovery' to start drilling will only line the pockets of huge corporations who want to take more than we're willing to give. It does nothing but hurt us, our communities and our country more.

What about our recovery? The money to finally fulfill the empty promises of proper housing in our communities, or resourcing the health services we've been calling for for years.

And what about country's recovery? Country's water is the blood that flows through our body, and it is already poisoned. Where is the money to clean the water many NT communities are forced to drink?

This is short term money that will cause long term pain, sow division and damage country and community. We will not allow you to cause any more pain, hurt or division in our communities.⁸

Traditional Owners raised concerns over the course of the 2017 Northern Territory Independent Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracking (the 'NT Inquiry'), where our team attended many of the hearings in Aboriginal communities. It was repeatedly stated that many of their shared songlines run through these aquifers, so it is critically important that they be

⁴ New funding to improve water quality in remote NT communities as data shows high contamination levels, ABC News, 22 April 2021.

⁵

[https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/21/leaked-covid-19-commission-report-calls-for-australian-taxpayers-to-un-
derwrite-gas-industry-expansion](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/21/leaked-covid-19-commission-report-calls-for-australian-taxpayers-to-underwrite-gas-industry-expansion)

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-15/beetaloo-basin-at-the-heart-of-the-nt-fracking-gas-debate/9652390>

⁷ Senator Waters, Matters of Urgency - Gas Industry, 15 June 2021.

⁸ Letter from Traditional Owners, June 2021. This letter has been co-signed by almost 40,000 GetUp supporters and is included in full as Annex A to this Submission.

given the opportunity to see the plans of the proposed gasfield to even consider consent and clearance work. To date that information has not been forthcoming, there is no adequate legislation that will protect the scale subterranean sites, and the mapping, clearance and consultations for the Traditional Owner groups affected has not started.

May August

Good morning. It's good to see you there. You mob were just talking about when you went to Sydney

Ms August: Yes.

Senator McCARTHY: Do you want to give us the date when you went down there? What date was that?

Ms August: I can't remember when it was.

Ms Baldwin: I could answer that, or we could take it on notice. It was the AGMs in 2018 and 2019. I think they were on 18 October 2018 and 20 October 2019.

Senator McCARTHY: So you went to Sydney two times.

Ms August: Yes.

Senator McCARTHY: Could you give the committee a copy of the letter that you gave the CEO?

Ms August: Yes.

Senator McCARTHY: That would be good for us—and any other documentation and letters that you gave them. That letter was inviting the CEO to come to Minyerri?

Ms August: They can give you the letter.

We would also like to provide a correction of the dates of the meetings which Traditional Owners travelled for:

Wednesday 17/10/18 - Aunty May August, Stephanie Roberts and Stuart Nugget attended in person (letter presented)

Wednesday 16/10/19 - 25 Traditional Owners travelled to Sydney including Aunty May August and Stuart Nugget

Wednesday 20/10/20 - Aunty Naomi Wilfred & Raymond Dixon attended online

May August

Senator McMAHON: Thank you, ladies. May, you said that you now have a good understanding of what fracking is. Can you tell me in your own words what your understanding of fracking is and exactly what happens?

Ms August: [inaudible] they drill it under the [inaudible], and if it's—

CHAIR: We're finding it difficult to hear you, Ms August. You can take that question on notice and you can write a response. We can have a response to Senator McMahon's question, because we're having difficulty; it's breaking up a bit. That might be a bit easier.

Ms Baldwin: Would the committee accept a video from Aunty May? She can't write.

CHAIR: Of course, yes, however it needs to be. If it's difficult to write and you want to do a video, we can do that.

Senator McMAHON: Chair, we seem to be fine now. Would Ms August like to, again, detail in her own words what her understanding of fracking is?

Ms Baldwin: They want you to explain what you think the process of fracking is. You explain it to the senator.

Ms August: Fracking, if they start drilling around our country, is going to poison all the water. It's going to break the fishing.

Ms Baldwin: But the senator is asking: what do the machines do? Do you know what it does? You were talking about the drilling and the water before. You tell them what you think the process of it is.

Ms August: It's going to poison all the water.

Senator McMAHON: Ms August, what makes you think that? Has somebody told you that's what's going to happen?

Ms August: No. Nobody told us.

Answers provided by video testimony **here:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYt3JBmFW7I>