



ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

31 August 2021

The Hon Keith Pitt MP
Minister for Resources and Water
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister

Oil and gas exploration and production in the Beetaloo Basin

As you are aware the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee is currently inquiring into oil and gas exploration and production in the Beetaloo Basin.

As part of its inquiry, the committee received information from the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources (DISER) and Empire Energy Group Ltd. (Empire Energy). On 23 August 2021, documents were tabled in the Senate on your behalf that are directly relevant to the inquiry, in compliance with an Order for Production of Documents (OPD No. 1209).

Based on this information the committee has the following questions:

1. The response to OPD No. 1209 states that 'there has been no correspondence between the Minister for Resources and Water and Empire Energy or its subsidiaries discussing the [Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling] program' (p. 1). However, Lock the Gate Alliance has made a submission to the inquiry that contains an email from an unnamed Empire Energy employee to an unnamed staff member in the office of the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction dated 4 January 2021, suggesting that the company might have been in contact with you:

*Just before Christmas we discussed the Beetaloo Grant Program. Have you been able to identify the eligibility criteria and application process? Or could you please put me in touch with someone in Minister Pitt's office who may be able to assist?*¹

Did Minister Taylor's office refer Empire Energy, its subsidiaries or any of its staff to your office as requested?

Can you please advise the committee whether Empire Energy or any of its staff verbally communicated with you or your office in relation to the eligibility criteria and application process for the grant program prior to 18 March 2021?

2. In questions on notice, DISER has twice been asked to provide a copy of unredacted email correspondence between the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction and Empire

¹ Lock The Gate Alliance, *Submission 31*, Attachment 2, p. 1.

Energy dated 14 January 2021 (FOI Disclosure Log 21-013-68011m, p. 6). Did you or your office receive a copy, have knowledge of or participate in this email exchange? Additionally, noting that the committee's request to DISER has been referred to your office as well as that of Minister Taylor, can you now respond to the committee's request for this information.

In this respect, the committee draws your attention to Senate Procedural Resolution 51 which clearly indicates that the fact that a freedom of information request for information has been or could be refused under the FOI Act is not a legitimate basis for declining to provide documents or answer questions.

3. The response to OPD No. 1209 states that 'there have been no meetings between the Minister for Resources and Water and representatives of Empire Energy' (p. 1). However, the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction has formally met with Empire Energy on three occasions in the last 24 months (p. 2). Can you advise whether you or your office discussed these meetings with Minister Taylor or his office, either verbally or in writing? If the latter, please provide the committee with a copy of any written documentation evidencing that discussion, specifically its contents?
4. *The Saturday Paper* has reported that 'an invitation was extended to federal Resources Minister Keith Pitt, on behalf of the chairman of Empire Energy, Paul Espie, for a site inspection at the company's proposed gas mine site in the Beetaloo Basin in the Northern Territory' (21 August 2021, p. 1). Can you please confirm whether this invitation referenced a CLP fundraising dinner held in Darwin in October 2020? Did you attend the event and to your knowledge, how did the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction come to receive an invitation?
5. FOI Disclosure Document 68003 (attached) appears to show correspondence to or from Empire Energy on 6 January 2021. Please provide a copy of this unredacted email, again noting Procedural Resolution 51.
6. The response to OPD No. 1209 refers to multiple attachments that are part of the grant assessments. These attachments are not included in the produced documents. Please provide this documentation to the committee.
7. Have you and Minister Taylor, or your respective offices, discussed applications and applicants for funding under the grant program.

The committee would appreciate your response to its questions by 13 September 2021.

Yours sincerely

Senator Sarah Hanson-Young
Chair