



## ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

31 August 2021

The Hon Angus Taylor MP  
Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction  
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 behalf of the Minister for Resources and Water which 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 Energy and Emissions Reduction 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 your office dated 4 January 2021, stating:

*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?*<sup>1</sup>

- A. Can you please advise the committee when, where and how this discussion occurred, who was present and what aspects of the grant program were discussed?
- B. Did you or your office refer Empire Energy, its subsidiaries or any of its staff to Minister Pitt's office as requested?
- C. Can you confirm that there has been no correspondence between you and Empire Energy or its subsidiaries discussing the Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling program?

---

<sup>1</sup> Lock the Gate Alliance, *Submission 31*, Attachment 2, p. 1.

- D. Can you confirm that there has been no correspondence between you and Empire Energy or its subsidiaries discussing the design of a grant program to expedite gas exploration in the Beetaloo prior to its commencement?
  - E. Has there been any correspondence between your office and Empire Energy or its subsidiaries discussing the Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling Program (or the design of a grant program to expedite gas exploration in the Beetaloo prior to its commencement)? If so, could you provide that correspondence to the committee.
  - F. Can you explain why the correspondence from Empire Energy is referring to discussions about the grant program, its eligibility criteria and application process prior to the announcement of the program guidelines on 18 March 2021?
  - G. What discussions took place regarding the Beetaloo Grant Program between your office and Empire Energy before Christmas 2020? When did these discussions take place?
  - H. Can you advise whether you or your office replied to this correspondence, either verbally or in writing, and the content of that response? If you did not reply to the email request, can you advise whether you or your office provided Empire Energy with contact details for Minister Pitt or his office.
2. In questions on notice, DISER has twice been asked to provide a copy of unredacted email correspondence between you and Empire Energy dated 14 January 2021 (FOI Disclosure Log 21-013-68011m, p. 6). Noting that these requests have been referred to your office, can you 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 'Minister Taylor has not held any meetings with Empire Energy regarding the Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling Program's process, timeline or guidelines' (p. 2). Can you advise whether you or your office have had any informal meetings or discussions with Empire Energy prior to 18 March 2021 about a grant program to expedite gas exploration in the Beetaloo, including for example at the CLP fundraising dinner held in Darwin in October 2020.
- 4. Please advise the committee whether you or Minister Pitt, or any of your respective offices, have discussed Empire Energy or its subsidiaries application for grant funding.
- 5. *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 clarify if you received an invitation direct from Empire Energy and if so, when?

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

Yours sincerely



Senator Sarah Hanson-Young  
**Chair**