

Submission on Industry Research and Development (Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling Program) Instrument

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*“Fossil fuel subsidies are public enemy number one”:
Fatih Birol, Chief Economist, International Energy Agency¹*

Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) is an independent, self-funded, non-governmental organisation of medical doctors in all Australian States and Territories. Our members work across all specialties in community, hospital and private practice. We work to minimise the public health impacts and address the diseases caused by damage to our natural environment.

Doctors for the Environment welcomes the opportunity to submit comment on the *Industry Research and Development (Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling Program) Instrument 2021*. We note the single term of reference:

Oil and gas exploration and production in the Beetaloo Basin, with particular reference to the Industry Research and Development (Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling Program) Instrument 2021, which provides public money for oil and gas corporations.

DEA respectfully requests that the Department consider as part of this submission previous submissions related to hydraulic fracturing and gas developments in NT. These demonstrate our long term commitment to energy developments that promote and support the health and wellbeing of people of NT including the Beetaloo region.

<https://www.dea.org.au/submission-to-the-scientific-inquiry-into-hydraulic-fracturing-in-the-northern-territory-in-response-to-the-draft-final-report/>

<https://www.dea.org.au/northern-gas-pipeline-submission/>

<https://frackinginquiry.nt.gov.au/submission-library>

¹ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/politics-of-fossil-fuel-subsidies-and-their-reform/fossil-fuel-subsidy-reform/5CA9F830778142E3F0A093469A11F218/core-reader#>

DEA has five key concerns about the Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling Program

1. The program will accelerate climate change, increasing morbidity and mortality in Australia and globally

- Oil and gas exploration and production in the Beetaloo Basin will contribute to accelerating climate change. With current production methods, gas as an energy source is similar to coal in greenhouse gas emission potential. Leakage and fugitive emissions of methane, which is much more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, lead to the failure of gas to be a lower emissions fuel than coal.²
- Gas does not replace coal as a low emissions energy source. Rather the availability of gas increases emissions as coal continues to be used as a source of energy and gas is added to the energy mix.³
- Investment in gas development delays renewable energy development, increasing carbon emissions overall.⁴
- New gas developments will prevent Australia reducing emissions as required for us to meet our Paris Agreement commitments.⁵ This failure to meet self-imposed and globally recognised commitments will accelerate climate change, leading to increasing illness, injury, disability and deaths.⁶
- Even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities confirm that climate change resulting from greenhouse gas emissions is the greatest health threat facing humanity in the 21st century.⁷

2. The program will damage Aboriginal health and participation in democracy

- Aboriginal communities bear the greatest suffering from extractive industries in Australia: doubling of stillbirth and cancer incidence has been reported in communities exposed to mining. Stress, mental health and drug and alcohol issues are likely to contribute to these adverse health outcomes rather than mining pollutants.⁸
- Aboriginal communities in the Beetaloo basin have clearly and consistently expressed opposition to gas developments and frustration at government failure to respond to their voices.⁹
- Aboriginal communities are increasingly responding to historic racism and injustice. Government failure to heed Aboriginal voices may lead to compensation demands.¹⁰

² <https://www.csiro.au/en/research/technology-space/energy/what-is-unconventional-gas>

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S030626191501243X?via%3Dihub>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ <https://royalsoc.org.au/images/pdf/journal/153-2-PCP-25letter.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.thelancet.com/countdown-health-climate>

⁷ *ibide*

⁸ https://health.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/951742/Gunbalanya-Kakadu-Disease-Cluster-Investigation-Final-Report.pdf; Schultz R (2021). Investigating the health impacts of Ranger uranium mine on Aboriginal people. *Medical Journal of Australia*: In press

⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/worldtoday/traditional-owners-fear-gas-fracking-threat-to-traditional-sites/13344778>

¹⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-19/nt-voters-racial-discrimination-human-rights-commission/100227762>

3. The program is a threat to NT Government integrity

- The 2018 Northern Territory Independent Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing of Onshore Unconventional Reservoirs Final drew attention to:
“the community’s very real and understandable concerns with onshore shale gas extraction (including hydraulic fracturing) and the public’s lack of trust in the Government’s capacity and/or willingness to regulate any onshore shale gas industry.” (16.2).¹¹
- The 2018 inquiry’s Implementation recommendations included:
“recommendations in this Report are a complete package. It is only the implementation of the entire package that will create the framework that will mitigate the risks associated with any onshore shale gas industry in the NT to an acceptable level (16.1).¹²
- However, implementation of recommendations from the report is incomplete and some are yet to be instigated. Recommendations that are incomplete or yet to begin include some specifically about the Beetaloo basin, water assessments, aquifer draw downs, biodiversity and species loss, greenhouse gas emissions and regional assessments.¹³
- Further concerns about NT government accountability have been raised by an unrelated recent inquiry into alcohol policy which identified inappropriate influence of industry on NT government policy, contrary to expert health and Aboriginal voices.¹⁴
- In media reports the Chair of the Northern Territory Independent Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing noted the public opposition to fracking.¹⁵

4. The program undermines NT government policy climate change commitments

- The NT government has a strong commitment to action on climate change including net zero emissions by 2050.¹⁶
- For NT to reach zero emissions while developing gas, depends on technology that has not yet been demonstrated.¹⁷ While DEA supports innovation and aspirational development we believe in dependence on established and recognised technology. We note that commitment by the gas industry to the Western Australian government to enable development to proceed has been a \$100 million costly failure¹⁸ and led to 2.64 million tonnes a year of CO₂ entering the atmosphere per year since 2018.¹⁹ Since

¹¹ <https://frackinginquiry.nt.gov.au/>

¹² *ibid*

¹³ <https://hydraulicfracturing.nt.gov.au/action-items#filter=.safeguarding-water.not-commenced%2C.safeguarding-water.commenced>

¹⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-09/nt-woolworths-releases-independent-darwin-dan-murphys/100200942>

¹⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-27/nt-government-told-risks-can-be-mitigated-if-hydraulic-fracking/9592056>

¹⁶ <https://climatechange.nt.gov.au/resources-and-publications/updates-and-announcements/2020/nt-climate-change-response-released>

¹⁷ https://consult.industry.gov.au/climate-change/technology-investment-roadmap/supporting_documents/technologyinvestmentroadmapdiscussionpaper.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/04/chevron-could-be-forced-to-pay-100m-for-failure-to-capture-carbon-emissions>

¹⁹ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/millions-of-tonnes-of-carbon-added-to-pollution-as-gorgon-project-fails-capture-deal-20210215-p572na.html>

climate change is a health emergency DEA supports investment into established technology and emissions reduction in all states.²⁰

5. The program replaces opportunities for renewable energy development and export which would lead to much better health outcomes

- Solar, wind and hydrogen power development can be accelerated through government supporting private investment. \$50 million government support for accelerated exploration and appraisal in the Beetaloo sub-basin could be invested in renewable energy with greater energy output per dollar invested, while promoting regional employment, reducing emissions and enhancing Australia's reputation as a leader in renewable energy.
- Alternative investments could prioritise the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people on whose land the development is planned. Long term health and social benefits of investment that meets the needs of Aboriginal people have a social return at least three times the investment.²¹

Recommendations

1. DEA recommends that resources available through the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources 2020-21 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) be the subject of robust public consultation, prioritising the voices of Aboriginal people who likely to be most affected, both positively and negatively.
2. DEA recommends that decisions regarding COVID-19 recovery investment account for Australia's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals²², the Paris agreement²³ and the Closing the Gap agreement²⁴.
3. DEA recommends that Australia note international trends and norms in planning its COVID-19 recovery strategy. US, Europe and China have committed to reducing emissions, with major implications for the world's climate and energy security.²⁵ Australia could be left vulnerable to catastrophic economic loss through investments in fossil fuels that remain unsold.²⁶
4. DEA recommends that Industry Research and Development funding not be used to support the Beetaloo Cooperative Drilling Program.

²⁰ https://www.dea.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DEA-Net-Zero-report_v11.pdf

²¹ <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/social-return-investment-%E2%80%93-consolidated-report-indigenous-protected-areas>

²² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/australia>

²³ <https://www.industry.gov.au/policies-and-initiatives/australias-climate-change-strategies/international-climate-change-commitments>

²⁴ <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement>

²⁵ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/china-eu-and-us-cooperation-climate-and-energy/summary>

²⁶ <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/P1031-Carbon-Border-AdjustmentsWEB.pdf>