

Response to The Senate Standing Committee on Economics Inquiry into matters relating to the gas explosion at Varanus Island, Western Australia.

Introduction.

This response outline the impact of the Varanus Island gas explosion on sponsored, original research work into green house gas capture being conducted at Curtin University. Due to this event, the supply of dry ice (frozen solid carbon dioxide) used for the experimental equipments specialty cooling requirements has not been available for a period of Four months. Substitute cooling agents could not be used. This supply problem has directly impacted the schedule of this research project. The ongoing funding for this research project is highly competitive with other alternative technologies. Strict timelines have been imposed by the external funding body. Therefore further funding of the project could now, at worst, be in jeopardy or, at best just delayed.

Impact.

The impacted project has 2 full-time research staff members and a part-time research associate assigned to it. Although some alternative activities have been undertaken by these staff members, their overall productivity has been adversely impacted by this event. Therefore there has been a direct negative impact on labour costs. This gas explosion has also resulted in expensive specialist equipment having to be left idle and has impacted the schedule of a post graduate student. There has also resulted in delays in the commencement of other research projects.

Response.

In a very competitive R & D environment with limited funding opportunities, the sudden and total loss of a vital consumable due to a single industrial event, has not only proven direct costs but also indirect costs including an impact on the ability to meet required timelines. It would appear that the production of dry ice was based on a 'just-in-time' production / supply criteria. Although this may have some benefits to the dry ice manufacturer, it is submitted that this practice when faced with a total disruption of the primary material can be a disaster for the wider community. Clearly alternative sources of such consumables should be made available with some 'buffer' stocks maintained.