SUBMISSION

Dear members of the Independent Planning Commission,

I would like to make a submission regarding the proposed Narrabri Gas Development. I understand that consideration of this proposal is limited by the objectives of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, the aim of which is to balance the social and economic welfare of the community with the development and conservation of the State’s resources.

This submission will cover the issues I see with the economic, environmental and social aspects of the proposal.

Relevant sources of economic information include the Pegasus Economics Report of 16 October 2019, which draws attention to the fact that Renewable Energy is rapidly reducing in cost, and the demand for gas is already falling dramatically in NSW as alternatives grow. It also asserts that the quantity of Narrabri gas produced will be insufficient to reduce gas prices and more expensive to produce.

Recent articles in The Financial Review of June 15 (with Eloise Fowler) and June 17, by senior journalist, Angela Macdonald-Smith, go further, highlighting the fact that Santos artificially exacerbated the ’looming gas shortage’ by exporting reserves set aside for local use. Also, and I quote: ‘Alternative options to fill this shortage are mounting, increasing the commercial challenge’ and ‘A lengthy period of preparatory drilling, pipeline planning and the expected difficult search for co-investors still stand before any gas from the controversial project in north western NSW hits the market.’

An example of this commercial challenge is that the 20% equity owner in the project, Energy Australia, has signed up for gas from the new Pt Kembla import terminal which will be importing cheaper gas from overseas sources. In summary, even if the project is approved and goes ahead, it seems likely that the demand for the gas it produces will be considerably diminished and the anticipated high price (and profits) cannot be guaranteed if and when it were to become available.

A further economic reason to reject the proposal is that extraction sites will have the potential to destroy the productivity of highly productive farming land which grows food Australians rely on and provides agricultural employment. Nothing can grow in areas of chemical and salt contamination. It would also put at risk drought-affected farms. This is not congruent with the NSW Planning Department’s brief that the project is ‘approvable under strict conditions to protect water and land resources’.

The protection of the environment goes further than the protection of agricultural land. The effects on water, forest, native animals and birds, land, climate and humans are all implied by the word, environment.

First, water. For the extraction of gas, huge quantities of water are required. It is estimated that 37 billion (not million) litres of ground water will ultimately be required by this project. The irony of this situation will not be lost on drought-affected agriculturalists in the area.

Wastewater can release toxic volatile organic compounds (VOCs). While it may possibly be reused in the production process, this poisonous water cannot be used for any other purpose, nor can it easily be stored without further destruction of the land.

Any leakage could cause serious contamination of the aquifer by methane gas and toxic chemicals, threatening the crops and livelihoods of local farmers.

Second, forest, native wildlife and land. The Pilliga forest is unique. Its trees provide a concentrated carbon storage area – (trees: the best carbon banks in the country). The threatened loss of any of the Pilliga’s wide variety of bird life and its native animals is tragic, but particularly at a time when millions of animals and birds have been destroyed in the 2019-2020 fires. Hundreds of wells -it is estimated over 800 in the entire project - will severely damage this precious natural inheritance. No trees can regrow in areas of chemical and salt contamination. Even appraisal wells have already caused shocking damage in the forest, and would exponentially continue to do so in the future if this project were to be allowed.

Climate: The effect on climate has been determined by scientists who have calculated that in the extraction and transport of gas the leakage rate of methane of 3% would make gas as bad for the climate as coal over a standard 100 year period (The Carbon Brief; nin.tl/181xp8). This raises questions about the Federal Government’s drive to replace coal with gas. Will Australia ever reach its international target obligations if this is carried out?

Humans: The local opposition to this proposal has always remained high and currently stands at 97%. The loss of social capital cannot be measured but would appear to be high, destroying the morale of a united society in a remote area for the possible profit of investors in the city. Historically, when a population endures a loss of amenity on this scale, the result is a wide tear in the social fabric where deep and lasting bitterness divides those who profit from those who lose within the community.

My personal interest in this matter was first aroused by my late father, who, as a young man, taught Mathematics at Narrabri High School in 1935. He, who had grown up on the Richmond River, was so impressed with his experience of the Pilliga Forest that he told me about it frequently as I was growing up. Later, I visited, and was caught up in its magic.

I have been aware of the effects of global warming causing climate change since reading the newly published Australian Geographic magazine in the 1980s.

Thank you for your consideration of my submission.

Rosemary Miller