

## Submission objecting to approval of the Narrabri gas project

I write to object to the Narrabri gas project because it poses an unacceptable risk to the immediate environment, to the climate and to the people of NSW who would bear the costs of the risks of increased extreme weather disasters, pollution of water supplies and of stranded assets from a failing gas industry.

I do not live in the Narrabri region. I live in inner Sydney. I do not have to be personally threatened by drought, catastrophic bushfires, flood and storm inundation to fear the extremity of weather or climate change to oppose any development which adds to greenhouse gas emissions. The heatwaves of the last decade, the smoke pollution hanging over Sydney in 2019, the impact of drought on prices and on the economy more generally, all impact people like me who live in the cities. But I cannot ignore the wider picture for this country, its residents and the rest of world, especially the island nations of the Pacific and our neighbours in South East Asia. All will be adversely affected by the extremities of weather arising from climate change and many millions will suffer from shortages of water, food and any sense of security from the disruptions of a warming climate.

### Gas extraction a risky venture economically

The global price of gas has been falling for some years as there is a glut of the commodity on the market. Coals seam gas has become uneconomic to extract in the US because of the fall-off in demand from the recession caused by the COVID19 pandemic. Given that building both new wind and solar power generation are cheaper than new gas power plants, let alone coal power stations, it is very difficult to envisage a future for gas-fired power in the medium term. Notwithstanding the concerted push by the Morrison government for gas extraction and energy generation, without public subsidies it is unlikely to be an economic proposition. Gas is not a transitional fuel to a renewable energy future. Effectively the future of renewable energy generation is here. New gas extraction and power stations risk becoming stranded assets, propped up by public money which would be much better spent on supporting clean energy projects. I refer the IPC to the report at

<https://www.michaelwest.com.au/a-savage-call-energy-tsar-calls-time-on-australias-gas-cartel/>

All evidence points to gas extraction and use as worse than previously touted, largely because of the inevitable methane emissions, a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Increasingly the global market will price GhG emissions punitively as many countries adopt clean energy projects in public stimulus programs to drive an exit from the COVID19 recession. New Australian gas projects – Narrabri and the Northern Territory – could be penalised if they are undertaken when Australia is a signatory to the Paris Agreement to drive down GhG emissions and knowingly invested in ventures despite their predicted GhG emission impact. This may be regarded as speculative, but in fact it is a quantifiable risk.

### Gas exploration and extraction and impact on water

Over 20 years, Santos will remove 37.5 billion litres of water from deep below the Pilliga sandstone and treat it in the Leewood water treatment facility. The Pilliga Sandstone is the southern recharge for the Great Artesian Basin (GAB), the greatest single source/store of fresh

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water in the driest continent. If for no other reason this project should not be approved simply because any major action which risks harming this resource must have impeccable scientific support to show how it will not be a serious risk, how this conclusion is reached, and the supporting evidence based on several decades of data to account for long term variability in rainfall and water movement. The model offered has been substantially criticized as highly inaccurate and of dubious predictive value – see the Department of Planning’s Water Expert Panel (Appendix G, Assessment Report on the Narrabri Gas Project).

As a layperson I find it unacceptable and almost unbelievable, that a project which risks unquantified and therefore unassessed potential harm to the GAB water store could be contemplated. We have just lived through a severe drought lasting several years which impacted the whole state and is still affecting parts of NSW. We all saw regional towns run out of water and forced to truck it in to support the human population. We saw considerable economic harm inflicted on communities dependent on irrigated farming and we saw this reflected in food prices in the cities. This drought afflicted the major surface water source of eastern Australia the Murray Darling river system – no doubt compounded by over-extraction – but the lesson is that the continent’s water supplies are extremely variable over decades. In a warming climate the governments of the driest continent need to learn that lesson and both guard the invaluable ground water from any possible contamination and limit extraction. To approve wasting it in a mineral extraction unnecessary from the point of view of energy production or economic development is negligent of the public interest.

And there does not appear to be an adequate plan for management or disposal of the concentrated salt waste. The risks from the waste on top of the dangers of leaks and spills of the chemicals used in extraction are alarming. Over 20 leaks and spills from coal seam gas exploration activity in the Pilliga have already been reported. I can think of no major mining operation in this country which has not been found wanting in its management of mining or extraction waste. Many have been guilty of major spills or unlicensed disposal. This project takes place in the area of the headwaters of the GAB and in a large temperate woodland significant for its biodiversity. It constitutes another threat to wildlife through habitat interference and destruction. This after the immense destruction of the 2019 east coast bushfires catastrophe. Gas extraction is a dirty industry we do not need.

### Greenhouse gas emissions

There is one over-riding reason for refusing approval to the Santos gas exploration and extraction project – it will inevitably increase GhG emissions. Gas is not a clean energy source. I object to the disingenuous publicising of gas projects as somehow cleaner than coal extraction and use. The fugitive methane emissions are more potent in their GhG effect than CO<sub>2</sub>. Such emission have been consistently underestimated but are now becoming clearer. There is already a significant problem with naturally occurring methane emissions, whether from farm animals or sources such as melting permafrost. Their impact is alarming in the rapidly warming world where so little has been done to reduce human GhG emissions. I see that the former Chief Scientist, Professor Penny Sackett, has submitted to this inquiry that the Narrabri gas project could blow out the state’s emission budget. I quote from the SMH’s report:

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“The Project will add about 5 MtCO<sub>2</sub> [million tonnes of greenhouse gasses] annually to Australia’s direct emissions at a time when Australia needs to find about 7.5 MtCO<sub>2</sub> new reduction every year to meet its 2030 goal, as well as maintaining the reductions found in previous years...

“About 50 per cent of Australian gas reserves must remain in the ground to achieve a 2°C [global warming] scenario” (<https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/narrabri-gas-project-should-be-blocked-says-ex-chief-scientist-20200809-p55k20.html>)

A mining project causing such GhG emissions with a 25 year life-span is not compatible with the State government’s avowed target of net zero emissions by 2050. We know that 2050 is in fact far too late if we are to halt the warming already in locked in. There is no way such a project as this can be afforded if even the late target of 2050 is met.

Our state has had the most terrible year even before the pandemic which has shut down so much of the economy. Prolonged drought, catastrophic bushfires, wild storms causing coastal damage and floods even as I write this submission have wreaked havoc on communities and cost many 100s of lives, widespread adverse health impacts and loss of homes and livelihoods. The insurance industry will need to extract a major price for this and the economic impact is continuing. How much more damage must we endure before our governments give up their embrace of the fossil fuel industry and put priority on the lives and sustainable livelihoods of us the people whom they are supposed to protect?

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