

My name is Caroline Alcorso. For most of my life I have been a campaigner working in some small way to defend Australia's natural environment, birds, animals and heritage, in my home state Tasmania and my adopted state of NSW. I speak today as part of the Wilderness Society Inner West Sydney group; I have been a Wilderness Society member for 40 years.

Wherever I have lived, I have found that people draw immense pleasure, as well as health and mental resilience, from natural and wild places. Unfortunately Australia has not, on the whole, had governments willing to acknowledge the interests and needs of we ordinary people. They have preferred instead to protect the interests of developers, miners, hunters and timber companies, as I know only too well from Tasmania where many important ecosystems and rivers have been polluted or destroyed and animal species made extinct.

This is why I'm here today to raise my voice against the horrific Santos coal seam gas development. Simply, we can't rely on governments to do this for us.

There are so many reasons why the IPC, consistent with its risk-based approach and the precautionary principle, should reject this development. I would like to highlight 3:

1. The dirty nature of coal seam gas
2. Environmental destruction, absence of surveys and protective measures and fire risks
3. Santos' lack of a social license to operate.

### **1. The dirty nature of coal seam gas**

The evidence suggests that methane leaking from coal seams makes gas a dirtier fossil fuel than coal. Two factors are important here: the higher than previously thought fugitive and migratory emissions from coal seam gas mining, and the greater strength of methane as a greenhouse gas. While more research about coal seam methane is needed, the independent studies (ie not funded by the gas industry) throw enough doubt over Santos' claim that gas is a clean transitional form of energy to stop the project.

The reasoning and research pointing to the global emissions impact of the Narrabri project has been explained to the IPC in detail by Professor Kelly and his colleagues from UNSW.

Simply put, if this project goes ahead the IPC will be knowingly adding another boost to the catastrophic climate change that will literally make our world unliveable in my children's and grandchildren's lifetime.

### **2. Environmental destruction, absence of surveys and protective measures and fire risks**

The Santos project will cover 95,000 hectares of the iconic Pilliga forest, the largest native woodland remaining in Eastern Australia. Ten threatened plants and 35 threatened fauna have already been found by the limited assessment in the gasfield area. These include pygmy possums, koalas and the Pilliga mouse. Koalas in the area are under considerable stress currently.

Given the increased frequency and cumulative impacts of natural disasters now affecting Australia, we should be treating this native woodland as precious: seeing it as a haven for threatened species, a potential recovery site for the koala population, and doing everything we can to enhance its ecological health. After all, between half and two-thirds of northern NSW's woodlands have been cleared since white settlement. Just in last summer's fire, more than 70 animal species had more than 30% of their habitats burned.

Instead the Santos project will add further sources of trauma to those our native fauna already experience, disrupting tranquil landscapes, fragmenting bushlands, and constructing roads and 850 noisy, light-filled mines that bring new fire risks.

### **3. Santos' lack of a social license to operate**

Opposition to the proposed project is massive and the IPC should listen to it. Santos has no social license to proceed. This is true whether one looks locally, nationally or internationally. Unlike many other mining companies, Santos appears not to recognise this, making it more morally incumbent than ever on the IPC to do so. Crucially a significant section of the area's Indigenous custodians, the Gamilaraay people, have told Santos they don't want the project. They have petitioned the company, protested peacefully and taken non-violent direct action to tell Santos:

This toxic industry threatens our water, our country and our culture, and the Gamilaraay people say no to Santos' coal seam gas.<sup>1</sup>

Santos' commitment to undertaking a comprehensive cultural survey of Indigenous significant sites *after* approval is granted is far too late. How can the project be properly assessed when this crucial step hasn't occurred; relying on currently known sites is inadequate.

Previous experience has shown that if they already have approval, mining companies cannot be trusted either to undertake independent surveys, or to abide by their findings.

Of the 23,000 people those that submitted to the original DA, 64% of Narrabri local submitters objected; more generally, 98% of submitters objected to it. This is the largest opposition to any project in the history of NSW, and this opposition exists despite Santos' attempts to bolster its name by spending on local sport and drought projects. People believe that the likely damage to agriculture, the water table and the environment is too large, for just 150 estimated new jobs on project completion.

Improved transparency featured very prominently in the 2014 Chief Scientist's report, with the aim that people are enabled to understand the rationale, costs, and benefits of the project. Santos cites the Chief Scientist's report in support of safe coal seam gas mining. However, the report specified prerequisite conditions, almost none of which have been met<sup>2</sup>. It is indeed shameful that this year local organisations People for the Plains and Lock the Gate report that it has become harder, not easier, to access clear information about the project since the mid-2010s<sup>3</sup>.

Farmers are concerned about the ground water risks, as the wells could pierce the critical sandstone layers that allow surface water to flow into the basin. Santos claim this won't occur is insufficient and not convincing. People know about the Queensland experience, where to date nearly 600 bores used for stock and domestic use have run dry. Sufficient to say that farms in the area will no longer be insurable. The Legislative Council's report notes that insurers are definite:

... coal seam gas operations are not covered by insurance that can protect surrounding landholders, or landholders that host CSG wells, from immediate or long-term

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<sup>1</sup> Northern Daily Leader, 23 December 2015, Threat to country - Aboriginal reps join in Santos battle.

<sup>2</sup> Legislative Council (2020) The implementation of the recommendations contained in the NSW Chief Scientist's Independent Review of Coal Seam Gas Activities in New South Wales.

<sup>3</sup> Legislative Council, Parliament of NSW (2020) Report 42: The implementation of the recommendations contained in the NSW Chief Scientist's Independent Review of Coal Seam Gas Activities in New South Wales, para 2.17-18.

environmental damage from, for example, water contamination, weed infestation, water depletion or health damage.<sup>4</sup>

Contrasting with governments' abnegation of its responsibility to protect the community from environmental destruction in Australia, insurance companies are often the ones that display their understanding of the big picture regarding pollution, health risks and global warming.

## Conclusion

In closing, I'd like to ask IPC members to consider: is this dirty project, with all its likely harms and damage worth it? Is it taking us, as Australians, in a new direction, one where we don't just see our environment as something to be exploited? Or does it simply solidify old problems where the interests of a global corporation, exploiting a resource unlikely to be of benefit to Australians, is more important than the wellbeing and interests of local people?

Many supporters of the project have argued to the IPC that in a post-COVID world large projects are needed. This is clearly true. However, we need to also take account of alternative projects which could create thousands more jobs than the polluting Santos one, and build safe and sustainable regional economies into the future. Two of many are the following:

- Beyond Zero Emissions argues practical projects to decarbonise the economy could create 1.78m 'job years' over the next five years – on average, 355,000 people in work each year – while modernising Australian industry across several industries and many regions. See [The Million Jobs Plan](#).
- Ernst and Young argue for Delivering economic stimulus through the conservation and land management sector and argue that 53,000 jobs would be generated over the next 4 years with targeted regional investment. See [Delivering economic stimulus through the conservation and land management sector](#).

Good luck IPC with your deliberations. Thank you for this opportunity to submit; I really appreciate the care you have put into making the process transparent welcoming and inclusive.

Caroline

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<sup>4</sup> Parliament of NSW (2020) The implementation of the recommendations contained in the NSW Chief Scientist's Independent Review of Coal Seam Gas Activities in New South Wales, para 2.111.