

Opening Statement to the NSW Parliamentary inquiry into Coal Seam Gas (CSG)  
By Dr Wayne Somerville, Clinical Psychologist 21 September 2011

My wife Susan and I live on a rural property, and I have worked for 35 years in the Northern Rivers as a clinical psychologist specialising in the treatment of trauma.

I believe that unrestrained coal seam gas mining is a threat to country people more profoundly dangerous than any drought, flood, bushfire, or recession. I am deeply concerned that if this industry is allowed to permanently change the land and country life, then the result will be widespread emotional distress, social disruption and political turmoil.

For farming families, their land is their life's work; a testament to their past efforts and plans for the future. The value that farming families add to their properties during their lifetimes is often their only superannuation and legacy for their children.

Nowadays, the value of Northern Rivers' properties is not based on cattle, forestry, or dairy, but reflects the preciousness and desirability of peaceful, productive, scenic landscapes with good soil and clean, reliable water.

It's hard to imagine how you could make the current management of the coal seam gas industry more damaging to the well-being of country people.

Current New South Wales coal seam gas policy denies land owners the right to control access to their properties; it does away with the need to resume land and pay fair compensation to get to minerals; it favours big corporations over individuals; and it turns a blind eye to the loss in land value that, in effect, represents a compulsory, massive transfer of superannuation wealth from farming families to mining companies.

This is an extreme, radical experiment in social and environmental engineering. Every rural landowner faces the prospect of coal seam gas companies forcibly entering their properties, building roads, setting up camps, drilling multiple bores that punch a kilometre down through aquifers, digging dams to hold contaminated water, and building noisy, brightly lit up well sites that run 24 hours a day for the next 20 years.

The recent media campaign conducted by the coal seam gas miners suggests that this is about jobs and money for rural areas. But what kinds of jobs? And at what price?

Life is not just about making money. It's also about creating happiness and well-being. Just because some people will make a fortune extracting gas from the earth, it does not follow that this is a good idea.

Is the money the miners and government make going to be worth the price that the community will pay?

The situation rests on a knife's edge. There is great anxiety and fear in the community.

If governments perpetuate the deliberate destruction of property, lifestyle and prospects for country Australians, many will become depressed, some will suicide, but some will respond with anger, revenge and violence.

In the 1960s I witnessed the social upheaval and protest triggered by bad laws that conscripted young men to wage war in Vietnam. Over the years since then I have worked with hundreds of war veterans and their families to ease the dreadful consequences of those policies.

Now, another storm of upheaval and protest is brewing, and Australia might be in for an even more terrible time. And sadly it will be the families of farmers and mining industry workers who will bear the full cost of bad policy.

But if governments act to establish a fair balance, and protect the environment and the rights of individuals, then all will be well.

In 1976 the then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser acted on the recommendations of a Parliamentary committee and stopped sand mining on Fraser Island. Nowadays no one grieves for the lost royalties and jobs, and Fraser Island is an iconic national treasure.

In 1979 the Terania Creek protests saved some Northern Rivers rainforest and ignited a conservation movement that swept across the nation and the world.

20 years later, former premier Neville Wran wrote: “When I retired from politics, I was asked what I regarded as the Government's greatest achievement. I had no hesitation in responding that it was saving the rainforests on the north coast of New South Wales. Whilst I am proud of what we did, my only regret is that we did not do more.”

Let us hope that 20 years from now history records that Premier Barry O'Farrell has no regrets, because he acted on the recommendations of this Committee to protect and conserve the Northern Rivers and all of country New South Wales for the benefit of future generations.