

Dr Wayne Somerville - Speech at Gunnedah Town Hall – 11 Oct 2011

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

If the coal seam gas industry is allowed to destroy country life and the land, then there will be widespread distress, social disruption, and political turmoil.

The situation rests on a knife's edge. There is great anxiety and fear in rural communities. A storm is brewing, and I fear that Australia might be in for terrible times.

After speaking to the NSW parliamentary committee, I think that while we might hope for the best, we need to prepare for the worst.

I would like to talk to you about the psychological effects of CSG mining on rural communities, the motivations that drive the supporters of CSG, and what lies ahead.

For farming families, their land is their life's work; a testament to their past efforts and plans for the future.

Farmers manage their land so that it will support them and feed this country and the rest of the world into the future.

It is an obscenity that rural landowners face the prospect of gas companies forcibly entering their properties, building roads, setting up camps, drilling bores that punch through aquifers, digging dams for contaminated water, and setting up noisy, brightly lit wells that will run 24 hours a day for the next 30 years.

It's hard to imagine how you could manage the coal seam gas industry so that it was more harmful to country people.

This is the most extreme, radical experiment in social and environmental engineering that Australia has ever seen.

Current New South Wales CSG policy denies land owners the right to control access to their properties. It ignores our right to "quiet enjoyment" of the land we own and pay rates on. It favours big corporations over individuals and the environment.

Governments can resume land for fair compensation, but that is not what is happening here. Under current policy the rights of landholders are being violated without proper consideration or compensation.

But perhaps most importantly, current policy turns a blind eye to the massive loss in land values that comes with CSG industrialisation.

The value that farming families add to their properties during their lifetimes is often their only superannuation and legacy for their children.

The decline in land values caused by CSG mining is, in reality, a compulsory, massive, cruel transfer of superannuation wealth from farming families to mining companies.

CSG is not so profitable if you take into account the rip off of farmers' retirement wealth.

The psychological impact of such destruction of property, lifestyle and prospects will result in predictable emotional responses. For many, the loss will lead to anxiety, breakdown and depression. Some will suicide. But some people will respond with anger, revenge and violence.

Fear and anxiety are normal, healthy emotions. Anxiety alerts us to the presence of a threat, and fear and anger give us the drive to respond to danger.

Distressing thoughts, images and dreams, being irritable, having trouble sleeping, not enjoying life as she used to, having problems with memory and concentration; these are all normal reactions that go with preparing to fight off danger.

Our built-in survival mechanisms work well when we need to fight off a wild animal, but they are less effective when the danger is caused by distant politicians that you can't get your hands on.

Many people have used their anxiety and anger well, and have devoted enormous amounts of energy to fighting CSG mining.

If these efforts result in the danger being removed, then all will be well, and people will be able to let go of the anger because it has done its job.

But if these efforts fail to remove the threat, then the anxiety and anger will persist. Anger turned inward leads to depression. Anger turned outward leads to violence.

One of the Parliamentary committee members implied that anxiety about CSG was irrational. There is no way that anxiety about CSG is irrational.

Earth's great systems of soil, water and air support all life on this planet. Take care of the soil, water and air and life will thrive. Damage the soil, water and air, and life suffers. Coal seam gas mining pollutes ground and surface water. It contaminates pastures. It fouls the air. It harms people, animals and plants.

No, anxiety about CSG is rational, and it is justified.

I would like to say a few things about the political management of the CSG industry.

Most of us expect that any rational, good-hearted person who learns about the destructive effects of gas mining would want to change things for the better.

So why do certain politicians continue to support CSG?

The key is to understand that some politicians are motivated by irrational beliefs and greed.

Most people feel empathy, and follow the golden rule of treating others as they would like to be treated themselves. But some people believe that they have the right to further their own interests regardless of the impact on others.

Proponents of the CSG industry are so obsessed with their own self interest that all they can see is the gas down below. For them, soil, water, air, and the life they support, are just obstacles in the way of their getting to the gas.

For most of us life is not just about making money. Life is 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. The question should be asked: Is the money the miners and government make going to be worth the price that the community will pay?

Much of the political thinking on CSG is superficial and shortsighted - it is certainly not intelligent or wise.

Some politicians are unable to think deeply about anything for more than a brief period of time.

By contrast, country people routinely think about what it will mean a season, a decade, or even a lifetime down the track if they say improve a paddock or plant a woodlot.

The ability and determination needed to weigh up risks and benefits, and to see a job through is as valuable today as it ever was.

But the political supporters of CSG have ignored risk assessment and due diligence as they have revved up this industry.

As a member of the RFS, I know what bushfires can do. I hope that someone has properly analysed the risks involved in building a network of thousands of gas wells, connected by miles of pressurised pipes, across bushfire prone rural Australia.

An RFS volunteer I treated had been lucky to survive when his striker was overrun by the Canberra firestorm. Within a year of returning, my client suffered a severe psychiatric breakdown, and two other members of his crew had suicided. Such volunteers pay a price that goes unrecognised.

I hope that the RFS have policies that forbid their crews from going anywhere near a fire that threatens a CSG well.

Another “elephant in the room” that has yet to be properly addressed is the threat of violence, and destruction of mining property. Just ignoring the possibility of sabotage does not make the danger go away.

There has not been a terrorist attack on Australian soil. I hope that there has been a proper assessment of the risk of attacks on a widely distributed network of gas wells.

How secure are these facilities? What happens when they blow up? How easy is it to put out a burning CSG well or a gas pipeline ruptured in multiple places?

I trust that those responsible can guarantee the security of the gas network and the safety of rural citizens.

I have heard it suggested that CSG companies prefer access rights rather than ownership because this leaves the landholder with the legal liability for fires and other damage. As a landowner, I did not like the sound of that at all.

I would like to say a few things about the media and CSG advertising.

I think that the recent CSG advertising campaign is a cynical attempt to swindle the Australian public. The advertisements are illogical and irrational. They manipulate opinion through emotions.

One ad claims that “farmers support CSG”. Sure, you could find a farmer who supported CSG, but I could also find a doctor who could be used in an ad that said “Doctors support smoking”.

A local ad has an unnamed teacher saying that she wants CSG because this will give the area a second industry. What industry? Once the fly-in construction workers leave, we will be left with a diminished tourist industry and impoverished farming community.

And then there is the ad that shows a horse grazing next to a CSG well, with the usual caption of “natural coal seam gas”. They are cynically associating the positive word “natural” and an image of a horse with the dangerous and filthy product they are selling.

I wished I could afford to run a competing ad which said something like "Coal seam gas – Natural – Like cancer and death".

CSG advertisers want to divide city and country people. Letters to the Herald claimed that farmers opposed to CSG were guilty of NIMBYism and were in no position to complain because they used chemicals and their cattle damaged the land. Such attitudes are ignorant and divisive, and are just what the CSG advertising media want.

What lies ahead?

We live on a good creek, but during the last drought we had to rely on a bore for water.

At the end of our valley there are two World Heritage rainforests. If you follow the creeks to the tops of the ranges you will find where the water comes out of the ground. Aquifer fed springs have sustained these rainforests for millions of years. And now thousands of CSG wells are planned for our area.

If certain aquifers are damaged, then these rainforests will be destroyed, and our farm’s ability to survive droughts will be compromised.

The strength of the CSG industry is its massive wealth and political power. Its weakness is that it is on the wrong side. It pursues greed at a terrible cost to Australia.

Opponents of the CSG industry do not have great wealth, but they are on the right side of this issue. They accept their responsibility as custodians of the land. They want to pass on the right legacy to future generations.

They know that clean water, good soil, and healthy rural communities are going to be the most precious commodities in the world, bar none, in coming decades.

What will it take to stop the relentless CSG industrialisation of the Australian countryside?

History gives us some examples of protests that changed government policy, but the current situation is unlike anything that has gone before.

In the 1960s I witnessed the marches against the Vietnam War. Since then I have worked with hundreds of veterans and their families to ease the dreadful consequences of that conflict.

I remember the 1970s Terania Creek and the 1980s Franklin River protests. In Kyogle we will see similar protests. A planned pipeline from Kyogle, across the Border Ranges to Queensland, where the gas will be shipped to China, would open all of the Northern Rivers to CSG mining.

This pipeline will be strongly resisted.

But in most places we face a different kind of threat, and it is not possible to campaign effectively against thousands of wells that spring up all over the countryside.

We are in the early stages of a great assault. Rural communities have been blitzed by an organised, powerful enemy that has no regard for their well-being. Early victories have given the CSG industry a toehold in just about every community.

Unless our politicians come to their senses, I cannot see how we are going to avoid years of conflict and strife. I fear that along the way too many innocent people are going to be hurt.

All communities will need to band together and support each other if they are to avoid the burnout that comes with long campaigns.

We must not repeat the terrible mistakes that were made during the Vietnam War. The diggers were profoundly harmed by the shameful acts of a few people who spat and threw paint on them. But the politicians who controlled the war were never troubled.

A steelworker friend told me how hard it was for him to find work. He did not want to move his young family to the mines, and the CSG companies had offered him big wages.

Wherever this takes us, I strongly urge everyone not to direct their anger and protests at mining employees.

Protests should be directed at the politicians and executives who are responsible for the coal seam gas outrage. We must take the fight directly and personally to those who make the decisions.

But we had better hurry up if we want to protest to the executives involved. I read the other day that Metgasco, the company that wants to turn the Northern Rivers into a gas field, is selling out to a company partly owned by communist China. It won't be easy to protest to executives who live in Beijing.

What an idea! Start up a CSG company, and then make a fortune selling out to China who benefits from a five-year exemption on royalties. And then charge Australian consumers world parity price for the gas they purchase for domestic power production. How good is that?

How times have changed. I remember the Vietnam War era when the government told us that Communist China was going to come down through Vietnam and threaten Australia. I remember Bob Hawke crying over the students who were crushed by tanks in Tienamin Square.

And now politicians tell us that it is racist to question their policy of allowing China to buy up vast areas of prime agricultural land, and un-Australian to suggest that farmers should have the right to control access to their properties.

I hope it isn't true that there are ex-politicians profiting from such deals.

A woman from Tara, Queensland, told me that she had visited a farmer friend to find him curled up on the floor, crying. He was being driven mad because he could not escape the noise of a nearby gas compression station. He could not sell his land. He could not afford to move away.

We cannot allow such things to happen.

None of us can afford the costs involved in trying to convince politicians to act reasonably. But we will pay any price for the sake of our families and communities.

None of us wants this fight, but for our country, we will not back down.

The stakes are so high, we must win.

Thank you.