

Dr Wayne Somerville - Speech to anti-CSG rally in Kyogle 16 October 2011

A storm is upon us. Our future rests on a knife's edge. We can not allow the CSG industry to destroy our lives and the Kyogle country we all love.

CSG mining is without a doubt the most extreme experiment in social and environmental engineering that Australia has ever seen.

Not long ago I did not know what this was all about, but I have been on a very steep learning curve.

After talking to people affected by coal seam gas mining from the Liverpool Plains to the Darling Downs, I now know that we confront a threat more profoundly dangerous, more sinister than anything I ever imagined.

This has nothing to do with good government, reason, or fair play.

This is about the corruption of our political and legal systems for the benefit of a greedy few. A scandal is unfolding. The truth will come out.

We are in the early stages of a great assault. Rural communities have been blitzed by an organised, powerful enemy that has no morality and no regard for their well-being.

This is how the coal seam gas invasion works.

Documents obtained under Freedom of Information show that mining companies have been paying an army of Labour, Liberal, and National ex-politicians, and former public servants, to influence governments as so-called "lobbyists" on their behalf.

The employment of lobbyists might be legal, but the purchasing of such political influence by coal seam gas companies has resulted in policies and laws that are more than just bad. They are insane. Established laws to protect landowners and the environment have been thrown out the window. CSG miners are licensed to do whatever they want, wherever they want.

Governments have always been able to resume land and pay fair compensation, but this is not what is happening here. The rights of landholders are being violated without proper consideration or compensation.

The environment and rural communities are being destroyed for the illegitimate profit of a powerful few.

The destruction of a community begins quietly, by stealth. Advertisers try to swindle the public into believing that the coal seam gas industry is clean and green when, in reality, it is filthy and toxic.

Don't listen to the unnamed school teacher from Casino. This has nothing to do with bringing a new industry to town. What industry? Once the fly-in construction workers leave, we will be left with no tourism and an impoverished farming community.

The ads call it "natural coal seam gas". They should read, "coal seam gas – natural – like cancer and death!"

With a strategy of divide and conquer, CSG gets a toehold by conning individual landowners into signing secret, binding agreements to allow gas exploration on their properties.

The negotiator tells you that he grew up on a farm and he wouldn't do anything to harm farming families. His promises and guarantees won't amount to much when the start up operation sells out to a huge multinational petroleum company.

You might even be signing an agreement with a shelf company which has no assets, and the CSG drilling will be done by another company not bound by these agreements.

You will sign a confidentiality clause which makes it illegal for you to even discuss the agreement with your neighbours.

It seems relatively harmless at first, but then the horror begins.

You have signed away forever your right to control what happens on your property. Worse than that, you have seriously compromised everyone who lives near you. Their properties will be put into a buffer zone and made vulnerable to the gas companies. The first your neighbours will know about it will be when the crews and equipment arrive.

When someone allows CSG mining onto their property, or a CSG company buys a property, the value of all the land in the area plummets. In Queensland, families have had to just walk away from their farms because CSG mining made their land worthless. I have spoken to farmers who now know that they are going to regret these secret agreements the rest of their days.

All rural landowners face the prospect of coal seam gas companies being able to forcibly enter their properties, build roads, set up camps, drill bores that punch through aquifers, dig dams to hold contaminated salty water, and set up noisy, brightly lit wells that will run 24 hours a day for the next 30 years.

It starts with one well, but ends as a spider's web of pipes, wells, and toxic ponds across your property.

For farming families, their land is their life's work. The value that a farming family adds to their property during their lifetime is often their only superannuation and legacy for their children.

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

I heard about landowners in the Northern Rivers who have agreed to sue anyone nearby who signs a CSG agreement that affects the value of their properties. This makes sense to me.

As a rural area is industrialised, the psychological impact of such destruction of property, lifestyle and prospects results in predictable emotional responses.

Many suffer anxiety, breakdown and depression. Some will suicide. But some respond with anger 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.

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 our efforts result in the danger being removed, then all will be well, and we 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.

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.

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.

The money the miners and government make is not worth the price that our community will pay.

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

Have they analysed the risks involved in building thousands of gas wells, connected by miles of pressurised pipes, across bushfire prone rural Australia?

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

The "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.

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?

Can those responsible guarantee the security of the gas network and the safety of rural citizens?

I have heard 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.

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 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 we are on the right side of this issue. We accept our responsibility as custodians of the land. We want to pass on the right legacy to future generations.

We 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. I remember the 1970s Terania Creek and the 1980s Franklin River protests.

In Kyogle, we will see a similar hard fought campaign.

The planned pipeline from Kyogle, across the Border Ranges to Queensland where the gas will be shipped to communist China, would open all of the Northern Rivers to CSG mining.

Kyogle is where the tide has to turn. The pipeline must be stopped.

All people of the Northern Rivers must band together and support each other. We will not be alone in this fight. The organisers who invited me to speak at the Gunnedah Food Security Forum promised that they would come when we need them here in Kyogle.

This campaign will not be easy. There were two squads of riot police and paddy wagons stationed outside the Gunnedah Town Hall during the Food Security Forum. Is this a taste of things to come?

How far will these governments go to protect the interests of their mining mates?

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 personally responsible for the coal seam gas outrage. We must take the fight 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 is selling to a company partly owned by communist China. It won't be easy to protest to executives who live in Beijing.

What an great idea! Start up a CSG company, 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?

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 in Kyogle.

Land owners in Bulahdelah, and some communities in Victoria were able to turn the coal seam gas monster away because they all agreed to “lock the gate”.

CSG mining is already in Kyogle, and we have no time to lose.

Kyogle can be saved if everyone agrees to “lock the gate” to coal seam gas mining. We all need to talk to our neighbours.

Kyogle is God's own country. Let's keep it that way.

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

For the sake of our families, our country, and our future, we will force CSG mining out of the Northern Rivers.

Thank you.