

Dr Wayne Somerville
Mrs Susan Somerville
79 Toonumbar Rd
Kyogle NSW 2474
Ph/fax 02 66 333158
waynes@bordnet.com.au

To Members of the NSW Parliament General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5

RE: Submission to the Coal Seam Gas (CSG) Inquiry - Economic and Social Implications

I am writing to urge Committee members to consider very carefully the profoundly detrimental social impacts that will result from the CSG industry forcibly and irrevocably changing rural communities, the lifestyles of farming families, and land and water use in agricultural areas.

My wife and I own, work and love a 1,200 acre property west of Kyogle, in the Northern Rivers area of NSW. For over 30 years I have worked as a clinical psychologist in the regional city of Lismore and rural area of Kyogle.

Like most other landowners in the area, we are greatly concerned that under current laws the CSG miners could forcibly enter our property, construct roads and infrastructure where they like regardless of the damage that they do, and drill wells that will damage aquifers, pollute the environment with toxic chemicals, bring massive amounts of salty water to the surface, and subject us to constant noise, light, and visual pollution.

The CSG industry currently ignores our right to “quiet enjoyment” of the land we own and pay rates and taxes on. We appreciate that the State owns minerals, and that there are times when governments have to override the rights of individuals for the greater good of the society, but this is not such a time.

The CSG industry is like nothing that has ever been seen before in Australia. It has always been the case that local councils or governments could resume land for a fair compensation, but it is an entirely different situation when the rights of many rural landholders are violated without proper consultation, consideration of their rights, or payment of fair compensation.

As a professional psychologist who has spent his career working to improve the mental health of a rural community, I am very alarmed at the social disruption, depression, anger, violence, and political chaos that the CSG industry appears set to inflict on Australia.

It is probably difficult for folk who live in cities to appreciate the seriousness of the impact that CSG mining has on farming families. Farmers have to do without the conveniences of the town and city, but they are compensated for this by their love of their land and being able to work in a rural environment. It is wrong to think that it is all right to set up a mining camp or a permanently lit, constantly noisy pumping station within sight of a farming family's house. The impact on farming families is every bit as distressing as it would be for an urban dweller if someone forcibly came into their backyard and set up a noisy pumping station.

The emotional and psychological impact of such destruction of property, lifestyle and prospects for the future will inevitably result in predictable psychological responses. For many, the loss will lead to anxiety, depression and, for some, to suicide. But these will not be the only psychological and emotional responses. Some people who suffer severe loss perpetrated by others respond not with depression and withdrawal, but with anger, revenge and violence.

The “elephant in the room” that has yet to be properly addressed in the CSG debate is the growing threat of widespread violence, destruction of mining infrastructure and property, and serious social and political disruption.

We were around years ago when the peaceful and mild protests at Terania Creek focused opposition to forestry practices, and ignited a social and political movement that spread rapidly across Australia, forever more changing the laws and management of forests.

I fear that if the CSG invasion of the Northern Rivers goes ahead many people will not just roll over and become depressed, but instead will become angry and be tempted to vent that anger on CSG equipment and infrastructure. The World Rally was stopped in the Northern Rivers because a few people threw stones at the cars. Rainforest logging was stopped by a few people who chained themselves to trees and who sabotaged bulldozers and other equipment. Do politicians and CSG mining executives really think that they will be able to treat rural people with what will be perceived as callous disregard, and then expect that their millions of dollars of pumps, pipelines, and other equipment will survive, unguarded in isolated rural areas?

I strongly urge the Committee to bring some balance and a sense of “a fair go” to a situation that threatens to get out of hand, with unpredictable and profoundly damaging consequences for the entire country.

It seems reasonable to us that, provided a proposed CSG operation is truly environmentally safe (if that is possible), then it is essential that “fair and just” compensation be paid to any landowner who has his property damaged, his lifestyle compromised, and his right to “quiet enjoyment” of the land destroyed. It seems inevitable that the ultimate costs of ignoring basic standards of equity and fairness for rural people will far outweigh any short-term royalties paid by mining companies.

I implore the members of the Committee to do whatever they can to spare the country that we all love the storm of pain, sorrow and disruption that the uncontrolled CSG industry threatens to break across the land.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information or if I can in any way further assist the Committee with its enquiry.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Wayne Somerville and Mrs Susan Somerville

79 Toonumbar Rd, Kyogle NSW 2474

Phone/fax 02 66 333158

e-mail: waynes@bordernet.com.au