

# Interim Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Coal Mining

## Interim Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Coal Mining **Communiqué**

**Second meeting – 22 February 2012, Sydney**

Attendees: Professor Craig Simmons (Chair), Emeritus Professor Peter Flood, Ms Jane Coram, Professor Chris Moran, Professor John Langford. Associate Professor David Laurence was unable to attend due to prior work commitments.

The Interim Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Coal Mining has undertaken a preliminary identification of what assets are potentially at risk from coal seam gas and coal mining developments. The following assets were identified: aquatic ecosystems; terrestrial ecosystems; drinking water supply; irrigation water supply; surface infrastructure; reputation of science; industry; regional communities; and groundwater resources.

In addition to this, the committee determined six priority streams of research and knowledge acquisition to further assist their ability to provide sound advice on coal seam gas and coal mining projects which are provided to the committee. These six priority streams are:

1. A risk assessment framework, to enable the bioregional assessments
2. Knowledge projects and foundational science to better understand the impacts
3. Capacity building – both infrastructure and people – to better enable the research to be done
4. Data strategy and infrastructure (data availability and accessibility) to coordinate the information being accumulated
5. Collaboration between major research agencies and institutions by fostering capacity and capability to ensure effective outcomes and processes; and
6. Basin scale modelling which would provide data to support the understanding of risks and provide data for foundational research, including engaging with industry and state governments to enable currently collected data to be used.

The committee considered options for standard terms of reference for environmental impact statements for coal seam gas and coal mining projects. The committee was generally supportive of the content of the terms of reference for some example projects provided for its review, however, identified a number of potential information gaps.

The committee recommends that, where relevant, the terms of reference for future environmental impact statements could usefully require:

- demonstration that the proponent has satisfied guidance provided by the National Water Commission's national groundwater modelling guidelines; and
- development of water balance models, including the identification of local and regional impacts, including cumulative impacts.

The committee provided advice to the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities on the Mt Pleasant and Centennial Coal Mine Expansion projects.

To ensure the committee can provide well informed and timely responses to future requests for advice, the committee requested that supporting documentation include a range of the following information:

- quantifying water balance and the anticipated perturbations to the water balance as a result of a proposed development, including cumulative impacts;
- aquifer locations and their proximity to coal seam gas locations and/or coal mining operations;
- impacts of proposed developments on consumptive water;
- advice on data quality and groundwater modelling to provide additional confidence and transparency.

The committee noted that the Rapid Regional Prioritisation Project was proceeding as expected. This project will identify priority areas for bioregional assessments, with results being available for consideration at the committee's Bioregional Assessment Workshop on March 19 and 20.

The bioregional assessment process would examine the specific conditions of regions to allow for timely and high level advice on the impacts of coal seam gas and coal mining operations on environmental and water assets. The committee is seeking to commission the first three bioregional assessments in April 2012.

A National Risk Assessment Framework was discussed as a starting point to develop risk indicators for individual regions. The framework will be tested with states, industry, communities, and natural resource management authorities at the March workshop.

The committee discussed the importance of engaging natural resource management groups in the bioregional assessment process. This included the potential for providing funding to those groups to undertake preliminary work on the potential risks to local water assets from coal seam gas and coal mining development.

The committee noted that the Queensland Government had signed the National Partnership Agreement on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development. Discussions were still continuing with other states and the Northern Territory.

Officers from the Environment and Assessment Compliance Division of the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities contributed to the discussions of proposed projects under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

### **Meeting on 1 March 2012**

On 1 March, the committee convened in Canberra to attend the ANU Workshop on Unconventional Gasses and to discuss bioregional assessments and strategic research and development opportunities that are currently before them for recommendation.

Following these discussions, the committee agreed they were on track and in a position to move swiftly and progress timely project scoping and procurement by the Office of Water Science.

While in Canberra, the committee met with the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, the Hon Tony Burke MP, to discuss progress made so far.

At this meeting, the minister acknowledged the work of the committee to date and outlined the importance of this work to government decision making on coal seam gas and large coal mining development.

### **New South Wales**

On 6 March 2012, the New South Wales Government became the second state to sign the National Partnership Agreement on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development.

### **South Australia**

On 22 March 2012, the South Australian Government became the third state to sign the National Partnership Agreement on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development.

### **Committee Support**

The committee is supported by the Office of Water Science, a dedicated unit established in the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.