

Interim Independent Expert Scientific Committee for Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mines

Interim Independent Expert Scientific Committee for Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mines Communiqué

Meeting 1 – 17 January 2012, Canberra

The Interim Independent Expert Scientific Committee for Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mines (the Interim Committee) held its first meeting on 17 January 2012 in Canberra.

The Interim Committee has been established pending the formal establishment under legislation of the Independent Expert Scientific Committee for Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development.

The Chair of the Interim Committee, Professor Craig Simmons, was joined by Emeritus Professor Peter Flood, Ms Jane Coram, Associate Professor David Laurence and Professor Chris Moran. Secretariat support for the Interim Committee is being provided by the Office of Water Science—a dedicated unit established in the Commonwealth Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. The Interim Committee was assisted by Mr David Parker and Ms Kimberley Dripps, Deputy Secretaries of the Department, who provided advice on the background to the Committee's establishment and existing processes for regulating developments under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

Professor John Langford was unable to attend this meeting due to a prior work commitment.

The Interim Committee members discussed and formally noted their Terms of Reference and reiterated their commitment to provide scientific advice on coal seam gas and large coal mining proposals likely to have a significant impact on water resources, and to provide advice on priority areas for research that can be commissioned in 2011-12.

The Interim Committee discussed the most appropriate process, timing and nature of its advice on proposed coal seam gas and large coal mining projects and agreed to continue these discussions at its next meeting. The Interim Committee noted that such discussions will need to be informed by the outcomes of current negotiations of the National Partnership Agreement. Updates on progress towards a National Partnership Agreement will be provided to the Interim Committee at each meeting.

It was noted that at its February 2012 meeting, it is likely that the Interim Committee will be asked to consider and provide advice on a number of specific development proposals that have been referred for a decision under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

The Interim Committee affirmed their role in framing the scope and directions for a priority 2011-12 research program. It agreed to convene a two-day workshop in early February 2012 to gain a better understanding of the scope of existing research and significant knowledge and information gaps, and to develop a framework for research investment along with high priority research activities that could be commissioned in 2011-12.

The Interim Committee will also provide the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment and Water with advice on priority regions for conducting bioregional assessments in areas of high potential impact from coal seam gas and/or large coal mining developments and will scope and oversee these assessments once commissioned. The Interim Committee agreed to hold an additional two-day workshop in March 2012 on leading theory, practice and methodology for conducting bioregional assessments. The Interim Committee

also agreed that work should commence as soon as possible on a project to assist in identifying priority areas for bioregional assessments, with the outcomes of this project to be considered at the March 2012 workshop.

The Interim Committee agreed on operating procedures for Committee meetings and resolved to meet monthly, with the next meeting to be in Sydney on 22 February 2012. The two workshops will be additional to the normal scheduled meetings.

The Interim Committee gave approval to the Office of Water Science to engage with relevant regional natural resource management organisations to discuss a range of issues associated with the Committee and its work, with substantive discussions to be scheduled following the Interim Committee's workshops in February and March.

Given the strong community interest in coal seam gas and large coal mining developments, the Interim Committee agreed that, in addition to providing advice to the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, it will also release a communiqué after each meeting.

The Interim Committee agreed to incorporate, as a standing agenda item for each meeting, identification of potential conflicts of interest in relation to specific items of business for that meeting. A probity plan will be tabled at the next meeting, which will discuss proposed handling of conflict of interest. At this meeting, Ms Coram abstained from decision making regarding the provider of the regional prioritisation project.

The Interim Committee agreed that it may invite guests to provide expert advice to future meetings. As a general rule, observers would only be permitted where there is a strong case for them to do so (for example, where they can contribute significantly to the discussions of an agenda item). In relation to requests to attend meetings of the Committee as an observer, the Committee agreed that any request to attend a meeting would need to be made in writing to the Secretariat no less than three business days before the scheduled meeting day.