

Advice to decision maker on coal seam gas project

Requesting agency	Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population & Communities
Date of request	23 March 2012
Project title:	Apex Illawarra Coal Seam Gas Exploration Drilling and Gas Monitoring Program, Southern Sydney Basin, NSW
Summary of request	<p>The proponent is seeking approval under the <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i> to drill 16 boreholes for the purpose of coal seam gas exploration within the Wollongong Local Government Area of the southern Sydney basin. The study area occurs above the escarpment and extends from west of Stanwell Park in the north to west of Coledale in the south, primarily around the Darkes Forest region.</p> <p>The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population & Communities (the department) has requested the Interim Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Coal Mining (the interim committee) to provide advice on whether the proposed action, if undertaken in accordance with the New South Wales Government approval conditions will sufficiently reduce water-related impacts on matters of national environmental significance, specifically the vulnerable plant species <i>Pultenaea aristata</i> (Prickly Bush Pea).</p> <p>As a final decision on the proposed action is due as soon as possible, the interim committee was requested to provide its urgent advice as soon as possible to minimise the period this decision may be late.</p>

Advice

1. The interim committee notes that although not specifically designed to address water impacts on the nationally vulnerable plant species *Pultenaea aristata* (Prickly Bush Pea), the New South Wales Government's approval conditions require the proponent to implement a number of general measures to protect the species during construction and operation of the No. 16 exploration drill hole. These general measures include 'avoiding all impacts on the species' and having a 'suitably qualified expert on site during construction and preparation of the drill hole site' to advise on ways to minimise impact to the plant.
2. The interim committee further noted that in their Vegetation Clearing and Rehabilitation Management Plan, Apex have agreed both to employ a botanist to oversee construction and preparation of the drill hole site; and to remove any superfluous drill water from the catchment area for disposal at an appropriate site. Specifically, the proponent has undertaken not to discharge dirty water into vegetation adjacent to the borehole site (Niche 2012).
3. The interim committee concludes that although the New South Wales Government approval conditions do not specifically cover water related impacts on *Pultenaea aristata* (particularly groundwater impacts); on balance, it is likely that the New South Wales Government approval conditions will sufficiently reduce water related impacts on the vulnerable plant species.

4. The interim committee notes that given the New South Wales Government has already approved the project and the Australian Government is limited to considering potential impacts on matters of national environmental significance, it had not been requested to consider water related impacts associated with the proposed project more generally such as potential impacts on the Sydney Water Catchment.
5. The interim committee expressed a view that potential impacts on water would require careful consideration should the proponent wish to seek additional approval for activities associated with coal seam gas production.

Date of advice

27 March 2012
