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

Communiqué

Fifth Meeting: 16 May 2012, Canberra

Attendees: Professor Craig Simmons (Chair), Emeritus Professor Peter G Flood, Professor Chris Moran, Professor John Langford and Ms Jane Coram. Apologies: Associate Professor David Laurence.

The Interim Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Coal Mining (the committee) met in Canberra, on 16 May 2012, to discuss the provision of advice on four coal mining projects referred to it by the Australian Government. The committee also discussed its strategic framework, stakeholder communication strategy, proposal to establish a data platform for the knowledge and bioregional assessment projects, Stage 1 of a National Assessment of Chemicals project and recent media coverage.

The committee finalised its advice on the Codrilla and Sonoma Coal Mine projects; noting that these had previously been provided to the committee and the committee had sought additional information from Geoscience Australia. The committee continues to move towards the implementation of a risk assessment approach, based on foundational water balance method, as the basis for providing stronger documented evidence in support of proponent proposals and committee advice. The committee was also asked to provide advice on the draft terms of reference for two North-Surat projects, the Taroom and Collingwood Coal Mine projects.

The committee noted attention it had received in the media and agreed that its website should be revised to provide further information about how the committee operates, including the extensive arrangements in place for handling real or potential conflicts of interest. Committee members noted that despite concerns, some organisations to which they belong, but do not represent, have received funding from 'industry' for many years now. There has been bipartisan support among governments for universities, research and scientific institutions to collaborate with industry to ensure that academic research outputs are reflected to real world problems.

The draft strategic framework was further discussed. The committee has developed a clear understanding of the key knowledge projects that are required in support of coal seam gas and coal mining, a sound basis for bioregional assessment methodologies and is working to develop guidelines for proponent advice which are based on a risk assessment framework. When finalised, it is intended that the framework will provide the committee with the necessary foundations for implementing the committee's activities efficiently.

The committee noted the high level of interest from stakeholders in understanding the committee and its work. The committee discussed the importance of informing stakeholders of the model for transition to a risk-based assessment approach. Such an approach will provide greater knowledge of the direct and indirect risks to water resources and will be informed through bioregional assessments, knowledge projects and specific water balance information from the proponent. It was agreed that further work would be undertaken out of session.

The Australian Bureau of Meteorology met the committee and discussed the best approach to meet the requirement to establish a data platform that will provide an integrated framework for the acquisition and storage of data from bioregional assessments. It was noted that the data from bioregional assessments would include assets and values in a region which are influenced by flux or stores in the water balance. It was noted that the information being generated from bioregional assessments will be a significant benefit to governments, industry and the community. It was agreed that the committee and BOM would continue to work together to develop the necessary data storage requirements.

The committee also discussed a proposed project to undertake Stage 1 of a National Assessment of Chemicals associated with coal seam gas extraction. The project is a priority of the committee, further work will be undertaken to progress this project as soon as possible.

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. The committee will continue to work closely with the Office of Water Science to progress its work.