

PROTECTING PRIME AGRICULTURAL LAND

Liza Balmain, 'Glendon,' Nangwee, Queensland. 4407.

Saturday 26th August, 2023.

Dave, the kids and I would like to thank you all for coming to our farm today, with special thanks to Senator David Pocock, who has travelled a very long distance to be with us here today.

The farm upon which we sit has been in the family for over 100 years and means an awful lot to us.

We are hosting today's events alongside our lovely local community, with the amazing and unfaltering support of Suzie Holt.

We have gathered here today as a local and broad community of concerned citizens, who fear for the future of our finite prime agricultural lands and that of our landscape, ecological wellbeing and surrounding biodiversity, in the face of coal seam gas development.

Today is about information sharing, listening, collaborative discussion, advocacy and positive forward vision as to how best to protect Australia's finite prime agricultural lands for future generations.

We will hear first-hand the genuine and well-founded concerns from local farmers, those living and breathing the impacts on a daily basis, to those who see the writing on the wall as the CSG invasion and its associated impacts start to encroach and expand into new areas.

We will hear from a range of experts in the field of law, soil and plant health, hydrogeology, economics, regional planning and ecology, to whom we extend a huge thank you for coming here today to impart their knowledge and provide insight into the numerous issues surrounding the predicament farmers in this region and elsewhere.

I have spent the last 3 years getting myself informed of such issues and the intricacies of coal seam gas regulation. I can safely say it is an absolute minefield in itself and farmers face a horrendous uphill battle of trying to get themselves informed, with very little independent support, when the onshore gas industry invades their lives and livelihoods. Farming is hard enough without these extra challenges forced upon us!

And I say 'forced' because in Queensland the law has been established so that we have no right to veto the onshore gas industry accessing our land to extract their fossil fuels.

Farmers are inherently time poor and many simply do not have the time to devote to getting themselves informed to an adequate level to be able to engage on an equal footing with the gas companies. Many are subsequently pressured and coerced into signing unfavourable Land Access agreements, often containing confidentiality clauses (better known as gag clauses), which will sit on their title deeds, to be inherited by the next owners who have had no say in the matter, whether that be their children or a new business enterprise purchasing the farm.

Arrow Energy holds the petroleum leases covering this land and that extending from Miles in the north west to Millmerran in the south. Arrow is owned in a joint venture partnership between Shell (one of the largest multinational companies in the world) and PetroChina (a subsidiary of the Chinese Government).

Arrow first came into the Cecil Plains district over a decade ago with an unwarranted arrogance and lack of understanding of our intensive farming practices. After much widespread opposition from the local community, they went away with their tail between their legs and left us alone for a few years while they expanded their more marginal country and State forest areas to the west. However, in recent years they have started to encroach on the beautiful scrub soils of Kupunn and the idyllic

fields of Springvale; and we are today seeing the red flag impacts of the inappropriateness of CSG development on the prime agricultural lands of the Condamine Floodplain and surrounds.

At the time of Arrow's first attempts to come into this area, they were under an Authority to Prospect, which is basically a limited exploration licence, however in 2019 that was morphed into a petroleum lease, allowing full scale development. This was done under the radar and unbeknownst to the local affected landholders and community as the Qld legislation had been changed to remove the public notification requirement of such applications. This was no doubt done for the purposes of facilitating the advance of the gas industry and not to enhance transparency with local affected residents as should be the case.

As a forerunner to this intrusion, in 2014 the Regional Planning Interests Act came into effect, after strong concerns were raised by this very community. The Regional Planning Interests Act was intended to protect the very best of our State's top cropping lands, otherwise known as Priority Agricultural Areas. However, due to exemptions present in the Act, and Arrow Energy's ability to self-assess their eligibility to the exemptions, with little or no oversight from the regulator, much of the activity occurring on Priority Agricultural Area land in this area is not being assessed under the Act. This results in a complete lack of cumulative assessment. In my opinion the exemptions and self-assessment aspect are the downfall of this Act and render it ineffective in being the protection mechanism it was intended.

I personally have been consulting with Queensland Government departments and representatives over the last 3 years, as have many others in this region for many more years before.

Despite this ongoing consultation, the hierarchy within the Queensland Government are unwavering in their push to maintain a policy of coexistence, pursuing and facilitating the expansion of gasfields across regional Qld. They prove themselves unable, or unwilling, to recognise that mistakes have been made in tenure approvals being granted without appropriate risk assessment nor scientific-based knowledge, and that certain land characteristics and land use types cannot feasibly coexist with the extractive resources industry.

We feel exasperated by this process, relentlessly hitting our heads against a brick wall, which naturally has a result of slowly deflating our spirits and willingness to engage.

Therefore, we turn to our federal representatives and federal legislation to seek better protections of our land, soil and water, not only for food production purposes, but also for the environmental and ecological health of this region, now and into the future. More specifically, this day will culminate with a declaration to put to our federal representatives that would request amending the Environmental Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, to enable better protections for prime agricultural land. Welcome, and thank you for your attendance.