

COAL SEAM GAS

- I SAW IT FOR MYSELF

My Experience of the Qld Coal Seam Gas Field: *Jane Stevenson, December 2014*

Some years ago the Queensland gas company AJ Lucas announced that they would explore for coal seam gas in the Gloucester valley. Shortly afterwards AGL Limited took over the Lucas operation and announced plans to develop a three-stage 330-well gas field.

Gloucester has been divided over the coal seam gas issue ever since. Some residents see CSG as being a sign of progress, while others believe that coal seam gas will bring little benefit to our town and will cause damage to our environment. I have been against CSG as damaging to our tourist industry, as a pollutant of our rivers, and as a threat to our health.

I decided two weeks ago to go and look at the Queensland gas fields to get a better idea of what will happen in Gloucester should AGL's plans become a reality.



I have to tell you that I was shocked beyond belief. I ask anyone who is 'pro-gas', or who is undecided on the issue, to go to Queensland and have a good look at what is happening.

I know it is impossible for most of us to go there ourselves, but I urge the residents of Gloucester to find out about CSG for themselves. This is an issue where we must take one side or the other and sitting on the fence to see what happens is not an option. There are dozens of websites, videos on YouTube and Facebook postings to study.

So what did I see?

My first impression is that the Qld gas fields are in a landscape totally different to that of Gloucester. Some three hundred kilometres north-west of Brisbane on the edge of the Western Plains lie the small towns of Roma, Miles, Dalby, Chinchilla, Tara and Condamine, all of which are located near the gas



fields. I went to all of them. The towns lie some 100 km apart, the traffic roars between them and it is like being in a war-zone.



Paddocks stretch flat to the horizon sown to sunflowers, lucerne and corn. Here and there amongst the paddocks I could see gas wells looking fairly benign until I found some close enough to the road to allow me to see them properly. They are big, the size of maybe our school buses. They have water tanks and pumps and generators and stand on concrete pads in the middle of the paddocks. That's in the paddocks, where I guess the threat of bush fire is less than when they are sited in the bush. When they are sited in the bush it is a different story..... the concrete pads stand in the middle of gravelled areas about the size of a tennis court.

The 'tennis courts' are surrounded by 2 metre high cyclone-wire fences topped with several strands of barbed wire. The tennis courts themselves stand in the middle of an area that I estimated to be about 200 metres square that has been bulldozed out of the bush. The dead trees have just been shoved to the side where they lie in heaps up to two metres high surrounding the cleared area.



Access roads to the sites are bulldozed into the scrub, each fifty metres wide and sometimes a hundred metres long, and again the dead trees are just piled up at the edge of the road. Everywhere, signs warn of danger, of legal action that will be taken against trespassers, that video surveillance is employed and that QGC, the Queensland Gas Company, will prosecute any person who attempts to enter the property without due authorisation.





The sign that intrigued me stated the following: no smoking, no naked lights, no source of ignition. If, as they insist, the wells never leak, why is there any reason to fear naked flame? What could possibly go wrong? If naked flame is a problem, what does QGC think will happen when, inevitably, there is a bush fire? Even if the wells don't leak there is a strong chance that the wells themselves will fail in a bushfire -- we have all seen the twisted and buckled steel frames of houses burnt to the ground in temperatures up to 1000 degrees Celsius. What will QGC do

then? Will QGC then use the farcical policy of 'adaptive management' and send out fire-fighters who can't get anywhere near the well because now the unrestrained methane gas itself is alight and threatening to explode?

That risk is unacceptable.



Incidentally, AGL may claim that they have no connection to QGC, but I have a photograph of an AGL sign hanging on a QGC fence, so I believe they certainly are connected, and that AGL will destroy our valley just as surely as QGC has destroyed the country around Tara and Chinchilla.

Padlocks and chains and barbed wire are everywhere, the litter chucked out of the unbelievable traffic blows in the wind from passing trucks and it is indescribably desolate, God-forsaken and ugly.



In a way, the vast landscape is big enough to take it. The enormous sky, the flat horizon that is so far away, the itsy-bitsy little wells far off in the paddock it all seems fairly harmless. Until you step out of your car onto the side of the road and get a closer look.



I saw an evaporation pond at least 150 metres square, set in a much bigger area cleared of trees that were heaped up at the sides by the bulldozers. The pond was huge, and shallow, and covered with scum. Around the edges of the water was a foot-high rim of white crystalline deposits. The pond seemed shallow, with low retainer banks, and I believe in heavy rainfall that pond would overflow into the catchment of the Murray-Darling River system.

That risk is unacceptable.



I saw compression stations. I saw pumping stations. I saw a gas power station with its bitumen hardstand all around, the whole area looking as flat, bare and bleak as any airport runway.





I saw the gas pipeline that stretches from Roma to Brisbane, laid in a covered trench down the middle of a pipeline easement. The pipeline itself surfaces every now and again into a 100 metre cleared area, again with the dead trees piled up all around.

I guess the pipeline surfaces for an inspection point or perhaps to house relief valves for water precipitation, who knows? I'm fracked if I know what they are doing and I sometimes wonder if they do, with their reckless and heedless destruction of the countryside.

And for what?

We *know* that coal seam gas extraction allows toxic fumes of substances other than methane to get into the air. We *know* there is a risk that one way or another the toxic salts of the heavy metals mercury, arsenic, cadmium, and lead will get into our river systems. We took the lead out of petrol for the sake of our children's health, now we are asked to risk the fact that it could end up in our drinking water. **That risk is unacceptable.**

All for the promise of local jobs. There are no local jobs, or at least very few and mostly only of the unskilled type. I saw the FIFO, fly-in fly-out, workers disembark from their plane, all in their matching company uniforms, I saw them get into the bus to be driven to the work-site.

The only local job might have been the fellow driving the bus. I noted they all carried their own lunch eskies, so I guess there wouldn't be any local jobs catering for their lunch breaks.



I saw the camps for up to 250 workers, not many local jobs there either, because they fly in on Monday morning and fly out on Friday afternoon and are not allowed into town during the week.



I spoke to the owner of my motel in Miles and she said that she was busy during the week with CSG workers but there was no trade at the weekend because the FIFOs flew home on Friday and tourists no longer came to the area. She said that while it still seemed quite prosperous, she felt the good times were coming to an end because the CSG was almost up and running and as soon as construction was finished only skeleton maintenance crews would be employed. She stated that there were very few children left in the town because the young families had been priced out of the rental market by mine management personnel who were earning big money and who could afford to rent houses at top price.

Everywhere I looked I saw heedless trampling of the towns and the countryside. Everything is up for grabs, and money is the only language spoken. My greatest shock and dismay, still, is to find that landowners cannot get justice from QGC which is a British international oil and gas company worth 13 Billion (BILLION!) dollars.

It is the cruellest injustice that while someone who is renting a property can just up and leave if they don't like it, the owners cannot go elsewhere. They cannot walk away because they will still be liable for rates and mortgage payments, they cannot stay because their children are getting sick and they themselves are experiencing anxiety and depression.

Despite entreaty, QGC refuses to buy them out, merely stating that buying properties is not part of their corporate plan. It sickens me to my stomach that decent people can be treated as collateral damage, treated as losers who deserve nothing but contempt.

If I could change only one thing about the whole situation it would be that the gas companies would be compelled to buy out the landowner at fair market price. To a company worth billions of dollars it would seem to be the one thing they could do that would be halfway decent buy those people out and let them restart their lives somewhere else.

As it is, the policy is petty and inhumane. It degrades and humiliates people who have worked hard to own their property. It is vicious in its spiteful disregard of the health of those who have no hope of justice from any other source.

The state and federal governments choose to ignore the situation. The companies insinuate themselves into our communities with smooth talk and slippery smiles, claiming they have the interest of the community at heart. They hand out 'donations', they ingratiate themselves into our social fabric, and all the while they are selling us down the river and up the creek.

All of this must come over as a massive rant, but I went to Queensland only wanting to see for myself how good, or how bad, this coal seam gas business really is.

I have been shocked, and very distressed, and I just hope that AGL will remember that its share price has gone down sharply in recent months and it is quite possible that their shareholders are getting out of AGL as fast as they can. AGL refers in its website to 'natural' coal seam gas, desperately trying to whitewash the fact that methane gas is 34 times more damaging to the atmosphere than carbon dioxide, according to IPCC research.

I believe AGL itself feels guilty and ashamed of its own activities, and the only way out of that guilt and shame is for AGL to renounce its plans to turn the Gloucester valley into a gas field. Maybe then AGL could be proud of itself, which is not the case at present.

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