

Natasha Bitu, The Australian, May 14, 2012

MOST of the scientists advising the federal government on coal-seam gas pollution have financial links with the mining industry.

Four of the six members of the interim independent expert scientific committee on coal-seam gas and coalmining have a financial connection with mining companies, the Environment Department has revealed.

The committee was set up in January to advise on whether certain CSG projects risked contaminating water supplies. CSG extraction -- or "fracking" -- injects chemicals into mined coal seams to extract the gas by-product, which can be used for energy.

The expert committee has the power to stop the clock on mining approvals in Queensland, NSW and South Australia for up to two months while it deliberates.

So far, it has given the green light to two of the three projects it has considered -- Rio Tinto's Mount Pleasant project at Muswellbrook in NSW, and Apex Energy's CSG exploration drilling program south of Sydney.

But the federal government has accepted the committee's advice to impose strict conditions on Centennial Coal's colliery extension at Springvale in NSW.

The Environment Department has told the Senate environment committee that one of the expert advisers, John Langford, holds shares in CSG, coal and copper miners for his self-managed superannuation fund.

"(He) holds shares in self-managed super funds for Origin, BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and OZ Minerals," the department states.

Professor Langford has a 35-year career in the water industry, serving as chief executive of the Rural Water Commission from 1989 until 1994. He could not be reached for comment yesterday.

The department says none of the advisers has received "funding, income or direct or indirect financial benefit" from the CSG industry over the past five years.

But it notes that Chris Moran is director of the Sustainable Minerals Institute at the University of Queensland -- which receives more than half its funding from the mining industry. Its donors in 2010 included CSG and coalmining giants Santos, the BG Group, Rio Tinto and the nation's biggest exporter of thermal coal, Xstrata.

A third expert adviser, David Laurence, holds the University of NSW's Mitsubishi Chair in Sustainable Mining Practices, set up with a \$1.1 million grant by Mitsubishi Development, a Japanese-controlled coalminer.

The Environment Department says Peter Flood -- a geologist who has worked as a consultant for governments and the mining industry -- has received payments of "less than \$20,000 over the past five years from minerals exploration and mining, and has deferred payments owing of . . . \$50,000".

A permanent board of experts will be set up by July 1. "Strict operating procedures and governance arrangements will be established, including in relation to handling of issues such as potential conflict of interest, confidentiality and probity," the department says.