

Gas rumblings shake the hill

Community concerns ignite parliamentary debate.

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NOT SEAMLESS: Gas mining splits communities

MPs on all sides of parliament have added their voices to community concerns over the multi-billion dollar coal seam gas industry, with one member of the House of Representatives seeking to boost Commonwealth powers to block any projects which threaten water supplies.

A vocal stoush has developed in recent months between miners and farmers in the coal rich basins of New South Wales and Queensland which have seen an explosion in coal seam gas exploration over the past decade.

Some landowners are angry about being unable to stop exploration on their properties amid concerns coal seam gas mining threatens water resources and food security.

Independent Member for New England (NSW) Tony Windsor has introduced an amendment to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, which would require companies to notify the Commonwealth if they think a new project will impact on water resources. It would also enable the federal government to intervene and veto projects if it thinks water resources are threatened.

Natural resources belong to states, which are responsible for granting mining royalties and setting regulations. However some major projects need to be approved by the Commonwealth under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act if they are deemed to be environmentally significant.

Speaking in the House of Representatives, Mr Windsor said state laws have not kept up with environmental pressures new developments could pose.

“There is a need for a nationally consistent standard to allow certainty for gas and coal companies at the same time as protecting Australia’s limited water resources,” he said.

LATEST

BABY ALCOHOL DISORDERS INVESTIGATED

The prevalence of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) in Australian communities is being investigated by a parliamentary inquiry.

FASD is the term used to describe a range of cognitive, physical, mental and behavioural disorders that result from a baby’s exposure to alcohol when it is still in the womb.

The House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee will look at what sorts of intervention measures and prevention strategies can be used to combat FASD. It will also examine ways to better manage the issue through access to appropriate care and support services.

A recent inquiry into Indigenous youth and the justice system concluded that FASD was an emerging health problem across Australia and urged the federal government to recognise

FASD as a registered disability. It also proposed a further specific review into the issue.

Several MPs spoke in the House recently in support of a motion calling for more government action to reduce the rates of FASD.

Graham Perrett (Moreton, Qld), chair of the Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee, told the House around 2.7 babies in every 1,000 will suffer from FASD.

“Babies born with foetal alcohol syndrome face a range of difficulties later in life including lower IQ, developmental delays, behaviour problems, learning difficulties, memory problems ... and increased risk of alcohol and drug misuse,” he said. •

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NEWS

“If we are serious about food security, we need to protect these water resources.”

Independent MPs Bob Katter (Kennedy, Qld) and Rob Oakeshott (Lyne, NSW) have also raised water supply concerns during questions to the government in parliament.

And Labor MP for the northern NSW seat of Page Janelle Saffin added to the debate when she tabled a petition from her constituents.

“My primary concern is about water,” she said. “I note that often people want the federal government, whoever they are, to fix everything that the states do not do. This is not always possible, but this is an issue we need to tackle.”

Nationals MP Mark Coulton has told the House people in his electorate of Parkes (NSW) are becoming increasingly concerned about coal seam gas exploration.

“While I am not opposed to the coal seam gas industry as such and I believe there is a place for both farming and coal seam to coexist, I think that we need to have a closer look at the safety aspects of coal seam gas mining,” he said.

In response to Mr Katter’s question, Prime Minister Julia Gillard said the government was monitoring the debate over water impacts.

“In order to deal with this issue – billions of dollars of investment, a constitutional position and some

farmers with concerns – what you need to do is be studious, methodical and careful,” she said.

“You have got to make sure that you understand the situation, that you act consistently and that you give the same message to all parties.”

Greens Senator Larissa Waters said her party was in discussion with Mr Windsor over his bill when she introduced a Greens bill into the Senate which would give farmers the right to say no to coal seam gas mining on their land.

“Our bill will be a test for the government and the Coalition on where they really stand on food security and the longevity of our rural communities,” she said.

Mr Windsor would need the support of a major party and several crossbenchers for his bill to pass.

The House of Representatives Agriculture, Resources, Fisheries and Forestry Committee is inquiring into the bill and has asked all Australian governments to provide submissions.

A Senate inquiry into the management of the Murray-Darling Basin has also been investigating the impacts on it of coal seam gas mining. It is due to report by the end of the year. •

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THINKSTOCK

OILS AIN'T OILS: *Support for labelling bill dissolves*

PALM OIL BILL STALLS

Legislation requiring food manufacturers to state whether palm oil is present in a product has been rejected by a majority report of the House of Representatives Economics Committee.

Currently food containing palm oil can be labelled as vegetable oil. While some palm oil is produced sustainably, much of it is associated with deforestation in Indonesia and Malaysia which in turn threatens wildlife such as orang-utans.

During two days of hearings, the Economics Committee heard differing views from the food industry, environmental groups and representatives of the Malaysian government and palm oil industries about the potential impacts of this legislation.

The Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling – Palm Oil) Bill 2011 was co-sponsored by independent Senator Nick Xenophon and the Greens and had already passed through the Senate.

But the committee report recommended scrapping the bill because it would not be effective.

According to the report, the states and territories, which have the power to legislate on food labelling, would not be compelled to comply with the law.



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