COAST & WETLANDS
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Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport

Inquiry into management of the Murray Darling Basin – impact of mining coal seam gas.

The Coast and Wetlands Society Inc. welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the management of the Murray-Darling Basin – impact of mining coal seam gas.

A major focus of the Society's interests is wetlands, and we recognize the aquifers under the Murray-Darling Basins as 'wetlands' – not only do they contain substantial volumes of water they are also the habitat of a diverse biota. The stygobiota has been very little studied and we have few data on its composition, on the spatial distribution of individual species, or on ecological processes involving this biota. However, the stygobiota is undoubtedly a component of Australia's biodiversity, and conservation of biodiversity has been a major policy commitment of successive governments, to underlie our support for a number of international treaties and agreements.

Our lack of detailed knowledge on the stygobiota of the Murray-Darling Basin precludes at this time any considered assessment of the likely impacts on it from coal seam gas (CSG) exploration and extraction. However, this ignorance should not be a justification for an open slather approach to coal seam gas operations. Rather we would argue that this is very clearly a situation which calls for application of the Precautionary Principle. There should be a moratorium on both exploration and extraction until evaluation of impacts can be made on a basis fact rather than wishful thinking.

There are also nationally and internationally significant surface wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin which might be affected in various ways by CSG operations.

The CSG industry is relatively new in Australia, but is one which has expanded very rapidly. The regulatory regimes imposed by states to date have been industry friendly and important questions about the potential impacts have not been thought of, let alone addressed. There has also been very little attempt to identify, understand and engage with the concerns of the public. To an extent the horse has already bolted, it will be difficult to alter leases and conditions which have already been granted. However there are large areas where there is potential for CSG which have not yet been explored and other areas where exploration has or is occurring but where extraction approvals have not yet been granted. We hope that this current inquiry will make suggestions which will lead to more appropriate management regimes in the future.

While exploration and extraction licenses are granted by the states there are a number of triggers in the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* and other Commonwealth legislation which could allow for Federal Government involvement in approving operations and we would like to see a much stronger involvement of the Commonwealth in the future.

A particularly important consideration is the current incremental piecemeal approach of the states, where license and approvals are granted on a project by project basis makes it difficult to appreciate and assess cumulative impacts. We note that the new NSW government has implemented a 60 day moratorium on new approvals. While this is a welcome initiative, we would suspect that 60 days is far too short a period in which to develop a coherent long term strategic approach.

We welcome the decision if the Minister for the Environment, Mr. Burke, to declare the Pilliga project a controlled action under the EPBC Act, and to require an EIS which looks not only at the Pilliga operation but at the component parts of the project including the pipeline through the Hunter and the proposed export terminal. This will permit greater examination of the issues and expose the result of the examination to public scrutiny.

Coal seam gas extraction is likely to involve saline waters being brought to the surface. Management of these waters will be critical, as there is the potential to create salt scalds with death of vegetation and contamination of creeks.

Discharge of treated waters could change the hydrological regimes and ecology of creek systems.

Pipelines and wellheads would be potentially vulnerable in bushfires. This may lead to requirements for extensive Asset Protection Zones, creating extensive networks of cleared areas to the detriment of conservation values of vegetation. Proposals to locate pipelines in Travelling Stock Routes would affect the conservation value of TSRs and could detrimentally affect their value to agricultural management.

While it may be possible for wells to traverse aquifers without causing leaks, accidents and mistakes could, and possible will, occur. Given the importance of water resources through the Basin, is the risk worth taking?

Fugitive emissions of methane will result in increasing the amount of a particularly potent greenhouse gas into the atmosphere. Given the need to reduce such emissions, the potential greenhouse benefits from use of methane instead of coal may be negated by 'leaks' from the extraction and transport processes.

The agricultural and biodiversity values of the Basin are clear, as is the importance of the established social and economic structures in local communities. These values are enduring, and sustainably managed, will survive for many generations to come. The question to be answered is whether we place higher values on short term, inherently unsustainable gain, than on biodiversity conservation, food security and social cohesion.

Yours faithfully,

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