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Narrabri's gas-fired liability

BY **Patrick Lau**



Locals fear coal-seam gas mining in the Pilliga will destroy the forest, the water and the tourism industry



With rain finally returning this year, the canola fields around the Pilliga forests are deep in bloom by late September, their blanket of gold sliced through by sprays of purple wildflowers. From a distance the flowers look like Darling Pea, an endangered native that livestock find equally addictive and deadly. In the wake of a 2013 bushfire here in north-west New South Wales, freed from competition, the pea spread sharply and eventually killed thousands of confused, intoxicated sheep.

At the northern edge of the Pilliga, the town of Narrabri has turned the corner out of the drought and barrelled straight into COVID-19. The Tourist Hotel is managing a pretty decent trade in counter lunches, but there are plenty of stores still shut or even vacant. One retail shop on the main strip has put out a laconic sign: “Customers wanted – apply within”.

It’s lights off at the office of national energy company Santos, which for health reasons has been open only by appointment since June, but a few doors down local competitor Geni.Energy has set up a shopfront. A community-owned not-for-profit, Geni was formed to provide a renewable energy alternative to Santos’s gas-field project.

Geni joint executive director and local farmer Sally Hunter says: “We just wanted to do it differently to the way the fossil-fuel industry works. They plonk these projects down on communities and pit farmers against town people, and their whole purpose is to create division. We just wanted to do the complete opposite.”

Geni is aiming to connect small-scale distributed energy generation and storage assets into a virtual power plant. That sounds complex but boils down to linking up rooftop solar and home-battery systems across the town, together with small wind turbines on farms, to act in a more coordinated fashion. It is hoped this will result in cheap, clean, reliable, homegrown energy for Narrabri Shire, and a secondary income source for farmers to smooth out the boom and bust of drought cycles.

“There’s not overwhelming support for the gas. People just want a job. And 97 per cent of people support a renewable future for Narrabri,” Hunter says, citing a 2018 doorknock survey.

Santos has been eyeing the region’s gas resources for more than a decade, but a protracted approvals process only belched up a win for the company on September 30, when the state’s Independent Planning Commission (IPC) signed off on development consent to drill up to 850 coal-seam gas wells in an area that includes the Pilliga and surrounding farmland.

The IPC’s decision wouldn’t have surprised many, not least given all the talk around a “gas-fired recovery” from COVID-19, but it’s contentious nonetheless. The proposal attracted a record-breaking 23,000 objections, and seven days of public hearings in July and August saw hundreds of local residents line up to blast its perceived failures and flaws.

There are “monitoring and adaptive management” caveats in the IPC’s decision, and a federal assessment and ministerial approval required under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*, before drilling can begin in earnest. But barring some creative litigation, community participation in the process has now effectively concluded.

Santos has variously claimed that the gas field could generate the equivalent of half of NSW’s gas demand, lower energy prices for manufacturing and heavy industry, and firm up the electricity grid after the coal-fired Liddell Power Station is taken offline in 2023.

Residents, economists, energy analysts and scientists, including former chief scientist of Australia Penny Sackett, have taken aim at the merit of those claims and the assumptions behind them; it’s been a long-running debate held on shifting ground. Critics point to Santos unexpectedly updating its economic modelling at the last minute before the IPC decision, revising its job creation projections upwards by 78 per cent. Mark Ogge, energy and climate adviser at The Australia Institute, says the new figure is “based on an assumption that COVID-related unemployment levels go on to 2046”, and gas-field employees would otherwise have no options for a job.

Meanwhile, local tourism businesses report that visitor numbers to the Pilliga have exploded this year, with COVID-19 making domestic travel the only option. One tourism operator estimates that holidaymakers have more than doubled, telling me: “There’s never been this many people passing through the Pilliga.”

Maria Rickert, owner of a farmstay business, told the IPC that her visitors are “the greatest advocates for this region [and] under no circumstances do they want to see their newly discovered Pilliga sacrificed for gas exploration”.

Rickert’s business, Barkala Farmstay, may be somewhat atypical: the complex is actually inside the forest itself, set in a clearing of she-oak and eucalypts that echoes with the damp banjo sound of eastern pobblebonk frog calls. It’s a whimsical, wild hacienda strewn with ceramics from the onsite pottery studio and centred around a towering stilt house that looks like Snugglepup and Cuddlepie had a go at redecorating Baba Yaga’s hut.

But Rickert is not alone in expressing hope for a renaissance in the tourism industry, and fear for what the gas-field project will do to it. Representatives of several local astronomical observatories are particularly concerned about the impact of gas-field flaring on the region’s famed “dark skies” and its unique astrotourism sector.

“In rural NSW, where there are mining resources available, it often becomes this ‘mining or bust’ prospect,” Georgina Woods, NSW coordinator for the Lock the Gate Alliance, tells me.

“People are told that if you want development, if you want a standard of living that’s enjoyed by people in cities, if you want opportunity for your children, you have to trade off the environment, culture, your social cohesion, and accept the mining industry.”

Most of the environmental objections to the gas field are focused on the groundwater. There are fears that the region’s aquifers could be drawn down and depleted, or contaminated by methane leaks, salt or heavy metals disturbed by the gas extraction

process. In 2014, a test well was found to have polluted a nearby aquifer with 20 times the safe drinking level of uranium.

As a crucial recharge zone for the Great Artesian Basin, groundwater impacts here have a long reach, both spatially and temporally. Aquifers are also the only permanent water supply for many towns and agricultural properties in the region. Coonabarabran, a town of about 3000, was forced to drill six emergency bores during the recent drought.

But the list of threats goes beyond groundwater. David Watt, a local farmer and deputy captain of a Rural Fire Service brigade, warned the IPC of the increased likelihood and severity of bushfires. If the project proceeds, he said, “I will not be further risking my life or those of my team by entering the Pilliga to fight a fire ... I will not be a guinea pig to test their infrastructure.”

Watt was also among many who expressed concerns about their access to insurance, and Santos’s liability or financial assurances. Others pointed to the huge volumes of salt waste, the objections of traditional Gamilaraay owners, and potential social divisions and biodiversity loss.

Then there are the climate-change impacts, not just from the combustion of the gas itself but also from methane leaks (“fugitive emissions”), which arguably make it worse than coal. With Santos pledging to put everything it produces from Narrabri into the domestic market, those emissions will add to Australia’s ledger.

And while the 70 petajoules of gas that Santos proposes to produce annually is significant in itself, there’s a very real concern that once ground is broken, and a pipeline built, the Narrabri project will act as an enabler for other gas fields.

“A lot of the broader regional opposition to the Pilliga gas field is triggered by people’s understanding of the industry’s tactics in Queensland,” says Georgina Woods. “You begin with a small gas field in the state forest, and then that kind of gives your industry a foothold in the region ... This is about economies of scale, and Santos still have an interest in 11 other petroleum exploration licences around the region.”

For Sally Hunter and Geni.Energy, gas-fired COVID recovery plans – which propose locking Australia into subsidising new gas projects against credible scientific and economic evidence – are mindboggling.

“It beggars belief why government is choosing to take a future that leads to pain, and destroys communities and water, and doesn’t even create that much employment,” Hunter says. “But we’re doing our thing, and hopefully one day the powers that be will come to their senses, and some of the lobbyists will move aside.”



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