

Australian Government – Future Gas Strategy: Consultation Paper

GasFields Commission Queensland Submission

November 2023



Background

The GasFields Commission Queensland (the Commission) was established under the [Gasfields Commission Act 2013](#) as an independent statutory body to manage and improve the sustainable coexistence of landholders, regional communities and the onshore gas industry in Queensland. This decade of experience and learning places the Commission well to offer some advice on effective engagement with communities.

The Commission's establishment in 2013 was in response to stakeholder concerns about the development of the coal seam gas (CSG) industry in Queensland. To remain relevant and contemporary, the Commission has evolved its approach since its inception to build and manage a sustainable coexistence between the onshore gas industry, landholders and regional communities. In part this is in response to a number of factors including the maturation of the CSG industry, changing community expectations, and reviews of the Commission's functions and operations.

Currently, the Commission focuses its activities in three key areas:

- **engaging** with stakeholders to gain insights into coexistence issues, trends and opportunities and provide trusted information to landholders, communities and industries;
- **facilitating** effective stakeholder relationships and partnerships; and
- **advising** and influencing ministers, government and the gas industry on sustainable coexistence, regulatory enhancements, leading practice and emerging risks and opportunities.

The Commission commends the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (the Department) for progressing this important body of work in a collaborative way involving engagement with key stakeholders.

The Commission has provided its feedback on the Future Gas Strategy Consultation Paper (the Consultation Paper) in this submission by responding to a selection of the consultation questions with information relating to its experience in improving the coexistence between landholders, regional communities, and the onshore gas development in Queensland.

Summary

The Commission appreciates the opportunity to be involved in this consultation process and would welcome further collaboration with the Department to build upon the concepts discussed in this submission.

The Commission is offering its experience in managing and improving the sustainable coexistence of landholders, regional communities and Queensland's onshore gas industry – together with its extensive knowledge of stakeholder engagement to assist with the implementation phase of the Future Gas Strategy.

Prompted by the discussion paper questions, the Commission suggests three key opportunities that the department could harness to improve its engagement:

- **Clearly communicate the Australian Government's role in managing the gas industry**
Clearly defining and communicating the Australian Government's role in the management of the Australian gas industry would assist stakeholders in determining which entity to contact

for enquiries and assist in managing stakeholder expectations of the issues that are within the Australian Government's jurisdiction. This role is defined in the consultation paper, and it would be beneficial to communicate this more widely via a website and other communication channels.

- **Increasing transparency and information sharing with stakeholders**

Making information available to the public is fundamental to enhancing community trust in government and industry. Transparency can be provided through mechanisms such as public registers of projects, and information on assessment, compliance and enforcement activity. Publishing and promoting research in a manner that is easily accessible also contributes to building trust.

- **Partnering with other entities**

Partnering with other entities to conduct research and engagement can increase stakeholder confidence in outcomes and minimise overlap and duplication. The Productivity Commissioner's report on Resource Industry Regulation highlights some leading practice examples of this. Partnerships also present an opportunity for multiple entities to coordinate their consultation and maximise the value for community members.

For sustainable coexistence to occur, it is imperative that benefits to regional communities from the gas industry are maximised and the impacts are minimised. Clearly communicating the reasons for the ongoing drivers for further gas development is key to maintaining relationships with the communities that will host gas activity.

Responses to Consultation Questions

25. How can the Australian Government better communicate and provide more transparency to local communities regarding gas projects?

From experience, the Commission fundamentally believes that a high level of transparency is essential to building trust, mutually beneficial relationships, and ongoing coexistence. Trusted independent information and publications are key to facilitating community understanding and minimising misinformation.

The Australian Government could also potentially leverage relationships with other entities including, state governments, research bodies (e.g. CSIRO, GISERA) statutory bodies (Including the Commission and the Office of Groundwater Impact Assessment) and local government improve communication with local communities.

Transparency could be improved by enhancing the Australian Government's online platform to provide information such as:

- Information and data relating to assessment, compliance and enforcement of gas projects under federal legislation;
- Government programs, their objectives and outcomes; and
- Landholder rights from a federal government perspective and what they can expect in the development of onshore gas projects.

Where the federal government does not have jurisdiction, the federal government could help to achieve this by pointing communities to state governments and related entities such as the Commission and the Land Access Ombudsman. This action is particularly important in regions where new tenures for gas exploration have been awarded, and regions with limited established gas development.

At present, resource companies engage with landholders to make arrangements for land access and compensation in the later stages of planning for gas projects. No centralised platform exists to provide details of these projects to interested stakeholders and communities prior to this stage. There is an opportunity for the Australian Government to improve transparency by publishing details of planned and approved gas projects. Prior knowledge of planned and approved projects would enable communities and landholders to consider the development's potential impacts and benefits in advance of negotiations, improving coexistence outcomes.

The Commission has also found that the clear articulation the role of a given organisation or agency is key to successful stakeholder relationships. Communication and engagement with stakeholders is enhanced by clear stakeholder understanding of which matters an entity can provide assistance with.

The [Productivity Commission's Resources Sector Regulation report](#) provides further information relevant to this consultation question under the section on 'provision of information by trusted sources can help allay community concerns' (pp119-121).

26. What opportunities exist to improve engagement and consultation processes with industry?

The practices currently employed by the Australian Government to engage and consult with the resources industry are unclear. No published information is easily accessible to indicate if standard engagement and consultation processes are utilised, and whether these processes are considered adequate by the resources industry. The Commission has long established relationships and regular engagement with onshore gas companies active in Queensland. Based on the Commission's experience with industry, it is recommended that the federal government provide further information on these processes to facilitate relevant feedback.

29. How can the Australian Government better communicate and provide more transparency to local communities regarding CCS projects?

As CCS is an emerging technology relatively unfamiliar technology for many regional Australian communities being unfamiliar with the specifics, the expansion of CCS projects has the potential to experience community opposition similar to that experienced in the early years of the onshore gas industry in Queensland. The Commission's learnings from this period demonstrate that opposition was partly driven by a lack of independent information and inadequate engagement to deliver this information. Acceptance of new technology increases in line with greater awareness and understanding.

The Commission therefore considers early engagement with communities intended to host CCS projects crucial to gaining public acceptance. Government may achieve this through the funding and public release of scientific information of CCS technology communicated in lay terms prior to preliminary approval for CCS projects. Understanding the lessons learnt for the expansion of the CSG

industry in Queensland would assist with developing key communication collateral to build trust early in the communities that would host CCS projects.

The Commission's 'On New Ground' Report provides insights into the lessons learned from development of the world's first export coal seam gas industry, including best practice approaches to engagement with the local community.

Similar early learning by the Commission from the expansion of the gas industry were centred around community concern for the environment. Funding independent research into the potential impacts to water aquifers and human health from CCS would provide greater transparency of the industry and aid in establishing whether perceived risks justify community concern.

36. Describe the projects or best practice examples of industry engagement with the local community, as well as the benefits these projects bring to the people and regional economy.

Best practice engagement with communities requires transparency and honesty to build trust and enhance confidence. A local industry presence in the communities that host gas projects is also critical to maintain a company's social licence. To be effective, industry engagement should begin early and be frequent, fit for purpose and tailored to the needs of the community. It is beneficial to use multiple communication channels (i.e. newspapers, community noticeboards, social media, radio) and more than one method of engagement (i.e. in person, online). Where possible, engagement should be coordinated with other community based events to maximise the impact and benefit of planned engagement. Community sentiment mapping is also beneficial to understanding the needs of each community to inform tailored engagement strategies.

Examples of best practice engagement activities include industry shopfronts in regional towns and active presence in areas that host gas activities, which are highly visible and readily accessible to the community. Reference groups and field days inclusive of local community representatives where the resource company's intentions for the region are explained give the community an opportunity to have their concerns heard and collaborate on planning decisions and legacy projects.

Regional investment and benefits in Queensland communities have historically taken the following forms:

- Utilising local contractors on project development and ongoing operations (local spend commitments).
- Direct landholder benefits such as the sale of gravel and water, upgrades to on farm and local roads, and the construction of dams on property.
- Investment in community infrastructure (water, sewerage, hospitals, community centres, airport upgrades).
- Health initiatives (LifeFlight Surat Gas Aeromedical Service, Heart of Australia mobile medical program).
- Community grants and the provision of a grant writer service to assist communities at no cost to the communities.
- Funding for local schools including scholarships.
- Programs educating young adults on the availability of industry led employment opportunities to reduce regional outmigration.
- Support for local community events.

The Commission recently held a Community Leaders Council in regional Queensland with community representation from local government, regional businesses, agricultural peak bodies, Traditional Owner groups, and landholders. Representatives were asked to provide recommendations on how resource companies could improve their investment in rural communities. The following actions were nominated by participants:

- Taking time to connect with vulnerable interest groups, including tapping into First Nations and Traditional Owner knowledge and understanding their needs.
- Strategically considering local supply chains when engaging in more frequent long-term planning.
- Collaborating to share science and research transparently and in a timely manner.
- Placing beneficiaries at the centre of co-design.
- Improving investment partnerships through more efficient processes/frameworks and greater access to funds.