

6/12/17

Dear Justice Pepper and the Hydraulic Fracking Inquiry,

I thank you for all the work you have done, and especially for compiling and presenting it to the public for consideration and comment. I appreciate this opportunity and hope that you receive my comments and questions in the spirit in which I intend; to consider and ensure a healthy future for our next generations, and the environment in which we live.

My greatest concern is to seek confirmation and confidence that the Inquiry will ensure that their recommendations come from a process of true risk/benefit consideration, rather than simply seeking ways of addressing boundaries to establishing fracking industry in the NT. I mean no disrespect; I simply seek assurance that the processes behind this inquiry and the recommendations that come from it truly do reflect a process which considers the significant risks, as well as potential benefits.

In the Interim Report Plain English Version, for example, there was only one listed potential benefit of fracking industry in the NT (that is, point 26, relating to jobs for local people). This sits in stark contrast to a whole report essentially dedicated to addressing the many, many concerns regarding the safety of and potential risks to environment, human and environmental health, social wellbeing and future resources associated with a relatively new, un-tried technology. I wonder, how will the Inquiry panel balance these considerations in regards to each other (beyond the risk assessment matrix in Appendix 13) as they formulate their recommendations?

A secondary concern of mine regards the reference to the 'precautionary principle' employed; 'where there is scientific uncertainty and the threat of serious or irreversible environmental harm, measures must be taken to avoid the threat of environmental harm.' It seems to me that most of the risks, and the available information and evidence related to these risks discussed in the interim report would fit this description. I wonder if there is sufficient evidence to assure ourselves that we can indeed avoid the threat of environmental harm.

Considering this technology is only thirty years old, and the average mine lifespan is 20 to 30 years, I have concerns that not enough time has elapsed for us to be sure of anything, especially in terms of long term effects and impacts/ efficacy of remedial strategies. For example, the Interim Report refers to strategies to ameliorate risk of waste leakage, or for plugging wells, and then notes that 'we need to make sure that this will not cause problems...' But, how?

I think of the leaking nuclear waste tank sitting in Runit Island, amidst a rising ocean. No doubt, at the time the tank was built, people assured themselves that their technology and solutions were superior to any potential risks. I recall the famous quote from Einstein: "The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them."

At this time, having read through the full Interim Report, the summary and the Plain English Version, I find I have too many questions un-answered, too many references to the need to find ways to respond to issues or potential risks without actually detailing solutions or processes.

Some of these questions are:

- How long does it take for water to be replaced in the Beetaloo sub-basin?  
The recognition that 'there appears to be little consensus in the actual sustainable yield of the aquifer' is highly concerning - I would suggest that in order to make an informed, evidenced based recommendation, this information is vital.
- How has the panel considered weather predictions and projections in regards to climate change and changing (unknown) weather patterns? What about earth tremors/patterns?
- What percentage of the total emissions of Australia does this estimated 2% methane waste emission represent, and how does this sit in relation to our current targets in addressing climate change and global warming?
- The report addresses toxicity of chemicals used during fracking processes in terms of their effect on humans, but what about water quality, microbiome, insects, fauna and flora, including soil flora? It is not reassuring to read that there is not adequate toxicological information regarding the chemicals used in fracturing fluid. To my mind, this leaves far too much doubt and far too many potential risks to possibly proceed without further, adequate information.
- In recognising 'that fracking should not occur in special areas such as national parks', surely we simultaneously acknowledge that native flora and fauna do not distinguish between governmental boundaries and that ecosystems are interconnected. Further, we are constantly discovering new flora, fauna, relationships and connections; the Inquiry notes the existence of threatened and endangered species but how can we be sure of what we are even talking about? And how can we ensure that proper studies are done prior to the arrival of any industry?
- How, if at all, can we ensure that the risk mitigation strategies recommended by the panel are implemented by the government? One of my fears is that risks will be considered in terms of their impact once 'mitigated' by strategies considered by the Inquiry. However, should fracking exploration and industry commence, how we will ensure that the government/companies – at a minimum - implement these strategies as considered by the Inquiry in their investigation and recommendations?
- How will local Aboriginal people and communities be given more and better information about the problems and benefits of fracking? I live in Ntaria and my experience of community consultation for this Inquiry has not been inspiring. I learnt of the community consultation meeting about two hours before it was to be held when I saw an A4 piece of paper, written in English, stuck up on the clinic door. When I came to attend the meeting with my colleague, there was no one there. When I tried to call the phone number on the advertising poster, there was no answer. (A few days later when I tried calling again I spoke to a very helpful lady who sent me all the written information I have read through as I have been able). I would have loved to have been able to ask the panel

these questions directly. I regret that it has taken me so long to read through all the material I was sent and the time it has taken for me to compose this letter (though I am grateful for the opportunity to have done this).

As mentioned in the report, I also have concerns regarding the social impact of fracking industry, and all that it would bring. It is difficult for me to concisely explain my concerns; please, remember that mental health problems, physical health problems, social disruption and deaths, especially in small, isolated communities, can have devastating impact for generations. We cannot underestimate the potential harm and negative impacts of these risks.

Essentially, I wonder what it would take for the panel to NOT recommend fracking exploration and industry in the NT? For me, there are still too many unknowns, too many vague references to possible remedial options with no strong convicting evidence in regards to risk mitigation. These risks potentially have permanent, damaging and irreversible impact, on humans, flora, fauna, our water (our most precious resource), and our land. At this time, I do not feel that we are able to say with any certainty that these risks are outweighed by the benefits that fracking industry might bring.

I thank you for your time in reading my letter, my thoughts and – hopefully! – answering my questions and concerns. I thank you for your important work.

Kind regards,

Rosie Downing