

Food, coal or gas? Community action, land-use conflict and procedural fairness in the Surat Basin, Queensland

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Abstract

Land-use conflicts involving agriculture, extractive industries and urbanisation are longstanding throughout much of Australia. Despite early hopes that coal seam gas (CSG) development may offer more opportunities for maintaining agricultural land-use than would open cut coal mining, conflict over CSG development has escalated nevertheless. This paper focuses on community action groups that have mobilised in response to CSG and other resource developments in the Surat Basin, Queensland. The research outlines the development and professionalisation of these groups, their concerns, and government responses. Opposition to CSG was driven in part by the perceived threat to existing agricultural industries and to the liveability of rural townships and localities. The research examines the sensitivities associated with changing economic activities in regional settings and the potential division arising in small communities. Strategies adopted by groups and individuals in response to the competing aspirations for the Surat Basin are discussed.

Acknowledgement

The research reported in this paper was undertaken as one of several Regions in Transition projects funded by the CSIRO Minerals Futures Flagship.

Introduction

Land-use conflicts involving agriculture, extractive industries and urbanisation are longstanding in several Australian regions (the Hunter Valley, Illawarra, Bowen Basin, La Trobe Valley, and so on). Rarely is the outcome of this conflict the preservation of agricultural land. The vast majority of farmers in Australia do not make commercial rates of return on their investment in land and infrastructure and, even when they do, these returns are dwarfed by those achieved by mining and urban development. Arguments about the importance of agricultural land-use to local or national food security, cultural heritage and/or amenity have simply not been able to compete with the contributions that other forms of land-use make to tax revenues, employment and economic growth. Where farmers and other community members have been consulted by governments and development proponents over proposed changes to land-use, the focus of this consultation has been the management of community expectations (Lockie et al 2008). It has not been the democratisation of decision-making. When coal seam gas (CSG) was first mooted as a serious energy source, the opportunity seemed to appear to move away from the historically antagonistic relationship between agriculture and resource development. In contrast with the requirement imposed by open-cut or strip mining that all land overlying the energy or mineral resource be acquired and (even with serious rehabilitation efforts) degraded, CSG required only that a network of wells be established, allowing the maintenance of agriculture over the majority of the affected site.

Farming would not only persist, it was thought, farmers would actually benefit from more off-farm employment opportunities and more vital local economies. In light of the difficult terms of trade faced by most farmers, such benefits promised, in fact, to improve the economic sustainability of Australian agriculture.

The idea that CSG development will lead to a new era of win-win relationships between the resources and other sectors, however, has not been accepted by many living in and/or operating agricultural businesses in impacted regions. This paper focuses on energy resource developments (mainly, but not exclusively, CSG) and the mobilisation of community action groups in the Surat Basin, Queensland. The paper outlines the growth of community action groups that formed in the Surat Basin as a response to the expansion of the resource sector's interest in the region. These responses have driven an escalation of conflict over land use, an escalation that has occurred despite concerted government processes of engagement and industry-led impact assessment. Further, the rise of community action groups within the Surat speaks to debates about the transformation of rural politics and spaces. Surat-based action groups have mobilised outside the framework of peak agricultural interest groups that have emerged over the last 20 years and largely usurped the role of the old Country Party (Martin and Halpin 1998; Halpin and Martin 1999; Halpin 2004). The action groups draw on and seek to re-legitimise 'old' discourses of agrarianism (in particular, the proposition that what is good for agriculture is good for Australia) while, at the same time, developing strong networks with organisations, such as national environmental groups, whom historically have been regarded as antagonistic to agrarian interests. A new 'politics of the rural' appears to be emerging in the Surat which shifts politics away from the articulation of sectorally-based agendas by peak industry organisations (Woods 2003, 2006). This is not a politics of the rural which places agriculture in conflict with consumptive uses of rural space such as tourism (Woods 2009). It is not even a politics of the rural which places equal value on all agricultural activities. It is a politics in which highly differentiated interest groups form local and national alliances in response to spatially-specific threats to the diversity of values they ascribe to rural space.

Rural interest groups and new social movements

For much of the twentieth century, the primary avenue of political influence for Australian farmers was the electoral/parliamentary system where the Australian Country Party (re-named the National Country Party in 1975 then the National Party of Australia in 1982) was able to exert an influence disproportionate to its voter base due to strong political support for the promotion of agriculture and population growth in rural Australia in the national interest (Halpin and Martin 1999). By the 1980s, however, the influence of the Country/National Party was in decline and Australian governments were embarking on a major project of economic 'reform'; liberalising trade through the removal of import tariffs, export subsidies, statutory marketing boards etc (Lawrence 1987), and recasting farmers as self-reliant entrepreneurs who would prosper more through exposure to the discipline of the market than through the benevolent hand of interventionist governments (Lockie and Higgins 2007). At the same time, governments were willing to enter corporatist arrangements with peak industry groups, providing an alternate avenue for farmer representative bodies to influence the operationalisation of economic reform and to contribute to other policy arenas. Groups such as the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) (founded 1979) and Queensland's AgForce (established through an amalgamation of the Cattlemen's Union and Graingrowers' Council in 1999) largely embraced the mantra of trade liberalisation but continued to lobby government over the detail of its implementation while making a substantial contribution to policy development in areas such as natural resource management. Halpin and Martin (1999) argue that such groups are easily caught between their need to maintain a relationship with governments of the day and the diverse, and frequently contradictory, interests and aspirations of

farmers. As a consequence, they have frequently been seen as irrelevant and out of touch, especially where emotive and rapidly moving grass roots issues are concerned (Halpin and Martin 1999).

By the 1990s, there was evidence of an increase in direct action by Australia farmers protesting government policy outside the representative group structure typified by the NFF, AgForce etc (Halpin 2004). Woods (2003, 2006) argues this to be representative of a global proliferation of rural protest groups of highly variable foci, levels of organisation, and longevity; a proliferation more akin to the emergence of new social movements than to the evolution of traditional interest group politics. Offering participants the opportunity of transient involvement and flexible alliances, social movements mobilised in opposition to a common threat are less constrained by the competing aspirations and interests of their members than are more structured representative groups (Woods 2008). Movements and movement organisations mobilise individuals through the forging of collective identities just as much as through appeal to key issues and positions, the emergence of political opportunities, and the availability of resources (Roy and Parker-Gwin 1999). For all of these reasons, mapping the aims and dynamics of newly emerging movements can be difficult. However, by putting aside the question of whether anti-CSG action groups should be seen as part of a global new social movement, and constraining our focus to the Surat, it is possible to examine the situated emergence of calls for a new agrarianism which frames CSG energy projects as threats to national food security and other values, and the impact, to date, of these calls on extractive industry policy and planning processes.

Coal seam gas development in Queensland

The Queensland State Government has made a strong commitment to the expansion of the CSG industry in regional Queensland, heralding this development as a new era of clean green low carbon energy. In fact, the Queensland government has set mandatory targets for domestic gas-fired generation of electricity, increasing from 13 per cent in 2009 to 18 per cent by 2020 and strongly encouraged investment in the development of an export CSG sector (DEEDI 2011). Additionally, the Queensland Government has argued that CSG is more productive per hectare of land in simple economic terms than is cattle production – roughly 20:1 according to Rolfe (2011) – returning high royalties to the State and bringing economic benefits to regional Queensland. Adaptive management, they suggest, will allow for identification and response to any industry-related problems ‘on-the-ground’, thus protecting the environment and other social values (Hellmuth 2009).

Geologically the Surat Basin covers an area of approximately 270,000 square kilometres from southern Queensland into northern New South Wales and is predominately Jurassic sediments. The Surat Basin contains coal formations such as the Walloon Coal Measures which are attractive for the extraction of coal seam gas. Historically the focus on coal bed methane was pre-mining drainage with a view to improving the safety of underground coal mining operations and subsequently the methane was not utilised.

The potential for coal seam gas to reduce carbon emissions, combined with the Surat Basin’s proximity to existing and proposed pipeline infrastructure and improved access to markets, in Southern Queensland and for export, have driven considerable exploration and relatively rapid development of CSG resources in the Basin. There are more than 3000 coal seam gas wells located in the Surat Basin, and that number is expected to rise to 40,000 to reach full production over the next 10-20 years. Across the State, CSG production rose from 7.2 million cubic metres in 2002-03 to 4.03 billion cubic metres in 2008-09 and 5.66 billion cubic metres in 2009-10 (DEEDI 2011). Meanwhile, known reserves of CSG increased to 747 billion cubic metres (DEEDI 2011). If all Queensland’s CSG proposals reach full capacity, over 50

million tonnes per annum of liquefied natural gas could be exported, commencing in 2014. CSG development is also occurring in the Bowen Basin in Queensland and in the Gunnedah and Gloucester Basins of New South Wales, however, the scale of the Surat Basin developments is significant (Figure 1).

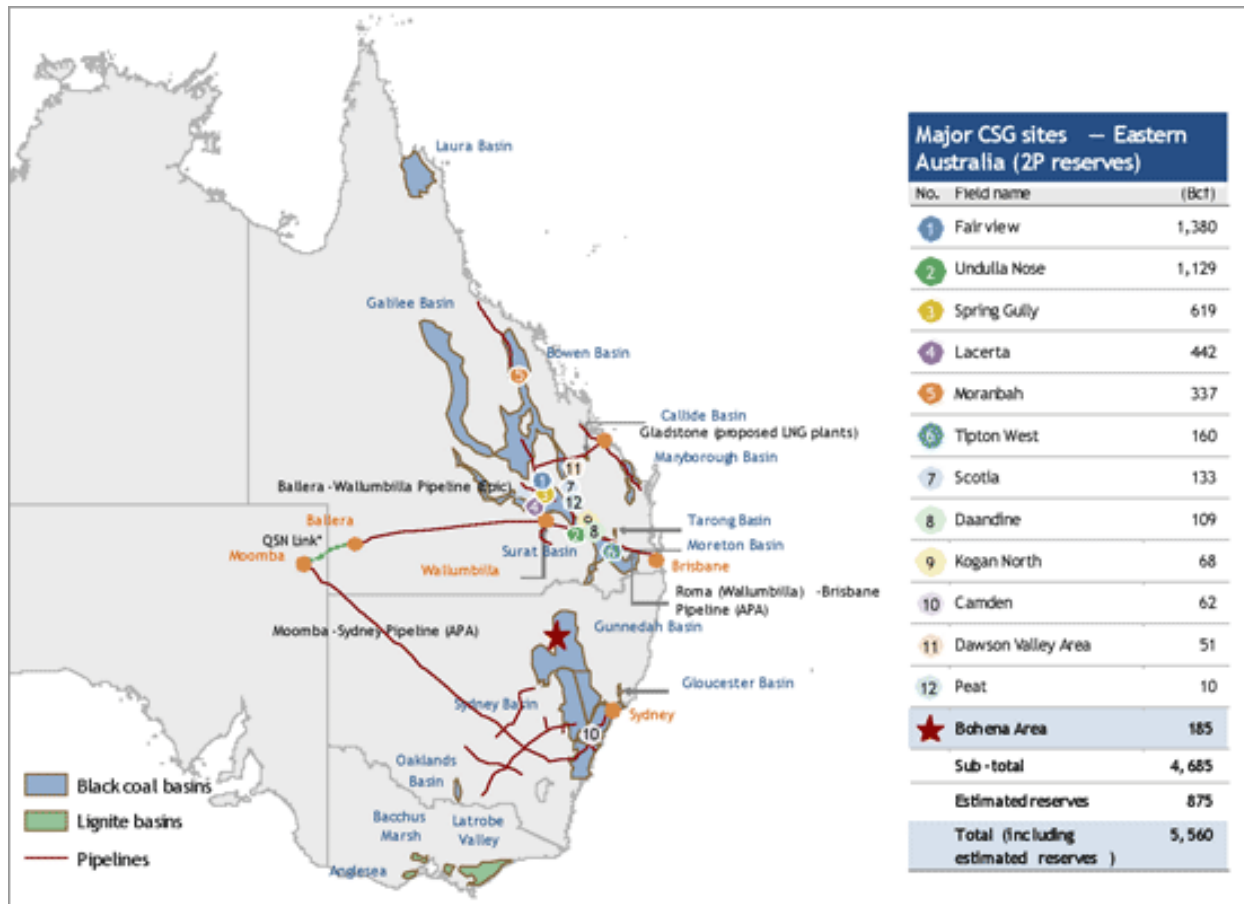


Figure 1: Map of Major CSG sites in Eastern Australia (inc. Surat Basin)
 Source: Wood Mackenzie, ABARE (via Eastern Star Gas) Notes: Reserves announced up to 1 January 2007.

The central concern, however, of community action groups representing agricultural and rural interests in the Surat Basin is the sustainability of agricultural enterprises and rural communities through the potential adverse environmental impact of CSG extraction and associated industries on agricultural land, and the undermining of social cohesion within rural communities (Arnold 2010). Environmental impacts associated with damage to waterways and to cropping lands as well as the treatment and disposal of salt produced during the coal seam gas extraction process are all questions of concern. These concerns have led most CSG community action groups to call for a moratorium on further mining exploration and coal seam gas development in the Surat. The same issues have been echoed in other regions subject to proposed CSG development including the Camden and Bohena areas of New South Wales (Figure 1).

Regulatory processes for CSG development in Queensland

In Queensland, mining and gas/petroleum projects are generally required to obtain land access tenure from the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (DEEDI) as well as an Environmental Authority from the Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM). To receive an Environmental Authority, the proponent is required to submit an acceptable Environmental

Management Plan (EMP) following preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) which is subject to public and government scrutiny and feedback. Development proponents have some freedom to choose how they will meet conditions outlined by the Queensland Government Coordinator General, although the degree of flexibility is shaped by political and public will.

The Queensland government has openly recognised community concerns about the development of the CSG industry in what are considered 'prime agriculture areas' and acknowledged that careful management is required to ensure best practice is followed (DERM 2011). The Government has introduced a raft of legislation, discussion papers, and community/stakeholder engagement strategies, all aimed at balancing investment concerns from industry and stemming community concerns and grievances as a result of change. The *Sustainable Resource Communities Policy* (SRC), for example, is presented as a framework in which a considered approach to change in Queensland's resource regions can mitigate and largely avoid adverse impacts of resource developments and concurrently maximise the positive benefits of resource investments. The SRC policy is intended to be inclusive: covering areas such as social infrastructure, employment, housing, community services, amenity, quality of life, health and education. Engagement mechanisms such as greater coordination and collaboration between stakeholders associated with resource developments are at the centre of the policy. Initiatives such as improvements to the assessment and ongoing management of social and economic impacts of resource developments through the EIS and Social Impact Management Plans (SIMPs) are intended to minimise disagreements between resource proponents and communities. Coordinating groups have been established on a state-wide and regional basis to facilitate closer linkages between government agencies and local leadership groups which closely reference other community and regional planning processes. Underlining this corporatist approach is the SIMP process which requires the negotiation of agreements by various interests.

At the same time, the Queensland Government policy has maintained a fast moving policy and legislative agenda. The *Sustainable Planning Act 2009* has become the State planning legislation and provides a framework for additional legislative and governance changes to facilitate the CSG sector developments and manage impacts. Amendments have been made to the *Environmental Protection Act 1994*, the *Water Act 2000*, and the *Water Supply (Safety and Reliability) Act 2008*, to protect groundwater interests for landholders and to ensure long-term aquifer stability. Key legislation including developing new land access laws and identifying strategic cropping land has been a priority. Queensland's new land access laws, which came into effect on 29 October 2010, boost the Government's Land Access Policy Framework and were developed in consultation with the resource and agricultural sectors. The new laws set out requirements of resource authority holders and landholders related to access to private land and compensation. In August 2010, the Queensland Government announced its commitment to protecting Queensland's best cropping land (a 'finite' resource) and is developing legislation to protect strategic cropping land (SCL) from further resource development. The SCL policy includes plans to introduce new legislation in late 2011.

The resultant framework for CSG development and for the maintenance and assertion of landholder claims for certainty of agricultural activity is dynamic and complex, with uncertainty leading to frustration among some stakeholders. An LNG Enforcement Unit was established in February 2011 in order to monitor CSG operators and attempt to ensure they comply with laws and policies affecting the industry. The unit involves multi-disciplinary staff from DERM and DEEDI, including environmental and groundwater experts, petroleum and gas safety specialists and staff specializing in land access issues.

Institutionalising engagement

A number of representative committees have been established to encourage stakeholder dialogue. In March 2011, the Queensland Government announced establishment of the Surat Basin CSG Engagement Committee. Former AgForce Queensland president John Cotter chairs the committee. The Mayors of the Western Downs and Maranoa Regional Councils and the Deputy Mayor of the Toowoomba Regional Council serve on the committee, as do the chairs of local representative groups, the Basin Sustainability Alliance, Jimbour Action Group, Concerned Landholders Roma North and a landholder representative for the Miles and Wandoan area. The chairs of the Queensland Great Artesian Basin Advisory Council and the Queensland Murray-Darling Committee join Queensland Water Commissioner Mary Boydell on the committee. The Directors-General of the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation, the Department of Environment and Resource Management and the Coordinator-General represent the Queensland Government. AgForce, the Queensland Farmers' Federation, Queensland Resources Council, the Australian Petroleum Producers and Exploration Association, and the four CSG companies active in the Basin are also represented.

Two regional sub committees have been established with a specific focus on the Western Downs (Dalby) and Maranoa (Roma) areas. The Dalby and Roma district committees are comprised of local representatives from community organisations and regional councils, CSG companies and rural industry organisations, and government departments. Key representatives from the Surat Basin CSG Engagement Group and Queensland Parliamentarians have engaged to discuss CSG/LNG issues including topics such as environmental regulations, landholder relations on safety standards and water management and opportunities including economic development, infrastructure and regional development.

The Surat Basin CSG Engagement Group was set up by the Government as an independent committee to give key stakeholders and local people a stronger voice on key issues relating to the growth of Queensland's CSG to LNG industry. The establishment of these consultative groups and the timely engagement illustrate awareness in Government of the need for additional avenues of communication with affected stakeholders in the Surat Basin. It also reflects the movement of the resources cycle from one of exploration and pre-feasibility study to one of production and a maturing of material and human supply chains. Additional moves by the Government include the initiation of 'independent' information sessions for landholders in the CSG footprint. Through Government funding, AgForce has established the Coal Seam Gas project through its project division, AgForward, to offer producers access to independent information and tools to ensure fair conduct and compensation agreements are made with coal seam gas companies, while AgForce continues to call for a moratorium on the coal seam gas industry's activities.

Predating the committees discussed above are several regional organisations oriented explicitly towards development of energy resources. The Surat Basin Regional Development Corporation (SBRDC) was formed in 2006 as an output of the Western Downs Regional Organisation of Councils (WDROC) working group to assist the region capture economic opportunities that were expected from developments stimulated by growth in the energy sector. Following local government amalgamations in 2008 the WDROC was dissolved and regional representation shifted to the Surat Basin Corporation (SBC). The SBC is a not-for-profit partnership of government, business and community organisations for the purpose of promoting sustainable development in the Surat Basin. The SBC was setup as a company, and as a regional development organisation, works closely with the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (DEEDI). SBC is funded by a membership base of more than 170 members that includes the major CSG energy producers, coal companies and manufacturing businesses active in

the region. It presents a strong pro-development stance that also recognises the need for building economic resilience in the region and the expansion of economic and social infrastructure. In 2010, the Western Downs and Maranoa Regional Councils acknowledged that the Surat Basin Corporation could offer benefits across regional council boundaries.

Regional representation is also provided by the Advance Western Downs (AWD) group. The AWD group is a partnership between the Western Downs Regional Council (WDRC) and the regional Chambers of Commerce. The AWD group formed in 2009/10 through consultation with the Western Downs Economic Development Task Group. Differentiating the roles of the SBC and the AWD is not a simple task, with a certain level of cross-over in purpose between the organisations. However, the AWD does not purport to represent the Maranoa region and, while representing business and implementing economic development initiatives, especially as a result of the CSG and mining developments, the AWD acknowledges concern for the protection of prime agricultural land.

The CSG representative committees overlay existing and more traditional representative groups for regional constituents including more specialised industry sector groups representing agricultural interest. The traditional rural representative groups such as the National Party, the Queensland Farmers' Federation, AgForce Queensland and sector specific groups such as the Cotton Growers' Association have been mostly unified in expressing concern over the pace and location of many CSG developments. However, there are important caveats on the extent of mobilisation initiated, or deemed possible, by these groups. As noted above, they represent diverse constituencies including members who may benefit from CSG investment, power generation, and so on. Local government faces a similar challenge. The Western Downs and Maranoa Regional Councils are in an often thankless position of interpreting policy decisions from the State, tempering ambitious development plans for their regions and representing local constituents with competing agendas. Organisations removed from direct accountability to the local citizen are at greater liberty to advocate either stronger development sentiments or to protest against changes that are not seen to be in their interest.

Lock the gate and throw away the key: Mobilisation of community interest

Despite the governmental approach of engagement, some rural community constituents and sections of the agricultural industry most directly affected by resource developments, whilst continuing to engage with the State Government, have sought to mobilise not only through existing channels but also through the formation of new social action groups resulting in an apparent escalation of conflict over multiple land use. Community consultation is an integral part of the EIS process. As mining and CSG companies started notifying communities in the Surat Basin about the potential for resource activities in the area, landholders began forming new communities of interest. These groups generally consist of local landowners who operate some form of agribusiness on their properties, with the exception of rural residential blocks (lifestyle blocks) such as those located between Tara and Chinchilla, who have become known as the Tara Blockies. In most cases, those affected by resource projects have become reluctant participants in the EIS process. Landholders have had to quickly learn about government legislation and the regulations that lead to the granting of licences for resource companies to operate.

In Queensland, an energy company must obtain an Authority to Prospect (ATP) or a Petroleum Exploration Licence (PEL), then provide a project specific Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for approval by the Coordinator General before an Environmental Authority (EA) to operate is granted by the Department for Environment and Resource Management (DERM). One of the sticking points in this process has been the fact that the Government and energy companies have been announcing multi-

million dollar CSG and LNG projects before the EIS process has even been completed. This *fait accompli* attitude towards energy development in the Surat Basin led affected landholders to reach out to both community action groups within the region as well as environmental organisations with lobbying experience. Community action groups realised that they could no longer fight their battles locally and began to coordinate with other lobby groups within and beyond the Surat Basin.

Prior to 2008, the majority of community organisations in the Surat Basin were either government sponsored Landcare groups tasked with natural resource management or development committees tasked with improving the economic viability of regional areas. Local farming communities in the Surat Basin have acknowledged the area as a rich source of coal and coal seam methane gas. However, this has not resulted in a quiet acceptance of a changing of the rural order in which agriculture holds sway. A number of local action groups began to emerge in farming districts as exploration for coal seam gas and coal reserves in the Surat Basin rapidly increased. These action groups were predominantly formed by neighbouring landholders who had been approached by energy companies and were concerned about the impacts of resource development on their land. At first the predominant feeling was 'not in my back yard' and actions were fairly localised, but as awareness of resource developments increased across communities in the Surat Basin, so too did the mobilisation of community action groups.

The structure of local action groups has depended largely on members' backgrounds. Some groups used their knowledge of state and national farming organisations and modelled themselves on an incorporated structure, while others took a less formal approach. Some groups have elected committees and a constitution, while others have operated on an ad-hoc basis. The more high profile groups have utilised technology by developing an internet presence, while others rely on word of mouth and a members' phone-tree. Some groups have sought out media attention through strategic engagement and actively protesting, while others have preferred to try and negotiate collaboratively with energy resource companies. However, one message that all the community action groups have in common is the call for a moratorium on further resource development in the Surat Basin until further research is conducted into the environmental impacts of CSG extraction. Public displays of resistance and the generation of a significant public profile for their protest against both coal mining and CSG production have been clearly evident through formal and social media. The following list illustrates the diverse range of local action groups that have mobilised within the Surat Basin.

- Concerned Landholders Roma North
- Coal for Breakfast
- Environment & Property Protection Association (EPPA)
- Fairymeadow Land Protection Group
- Friends of Felton
- Future Foods Qld
- Jimbour Action Group
- Save Our Darling Downs (SODD)

The development of these groups initially appeared to be localised, and within a relatively short timeframe several of the groups were explicitly distancing themselves from each other and some indeed from their own early focus. For example some groups began with a broad focus on the protection of all agricultural activity from mining and CSG development.

However, the announcement of a \$60 billion 20-year LNG deal between Britain’s BG Group and the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation in March 2010 seems to have sparked a new form of community action group within the Surat Basin. Members from a number of local action groups met in March 2010 and decided to form the Basin Sustainability Alliance (BSA). Members of AgForce, the Environment & Property Protection Association (EPPA), Fairymeadow Land Protection Group, Future Food Queensland, and Save Our Darling Downs (SODD) formed an alliance representing community action groups from across the Surat Basin (Figure 2). This was arguably the beginning of a split from the promotion of all agricultural interests to a refined promotion of the interests of specific agricultural interests and instrumental in the subsequent development of the strategic cropping land (SCL) policy.



Figure 2: Structure of the Basin Sustainability Alliance

BSA was established to represent landholders, community groups and individuals with serious concerns about the development of the CSG industry across Queensland and the associated environmental, health and social impacts. However, rather than taking a stance against energy resource development in the Surat Basin:

BSA is committed to working with government and industry to achieve a coal seam gas industry that has minimal environmental, economic and social impacts and preserves groundwater resources for future generations.

BSA committee members have publicly stated that this alliance of farming communities, landholders and protection groups from throughout the Surat Basin is an effective umbrella organisation, which has more credibility and political sway than smaller local protection groups. BSA has set down clear objectives for their role within the Queensland CSG debate and, through meetings with government and industry, has made some inroads towards achieving a more open dialogue. The fundamental argument of the BSA is that while it acknowledges the Queensland Government’s support for the CSG industry there is a distinct lack of scientific evidence to avoid the precautionary principle with regards to environmental and social impacts of the CSG developments. BSA has called for a moratorium on CSG development. Underlining this argument is a position that allows for the mitigation of identified impacts of the CSG developments through an increase in scientific evidence defining the impacts resulting in greater certainty. This is a strategy of negotiation in which co-existence is presented as a viable option, although the BSA does include disclaimers on its ‘Not at any cost’ blueprint, stating that it will not be bound by the positions or policies in the document and reserves the right to change its position at any time.

Since March 2010, the prominence of community action groups within the Surat Basin has escalated along with growing newspaper and media coverage, especially the airing of several stories on Australian television. For example:

- ABC's Landline: 'Pipe Dreams' on 2 May 2010 and "Risk Management" on 9 May 2010
- Channel Nine's Sixty Minutes: "Undermined" on 14 May 2010
- ABC's Four Corners: "The Gas Rush" on 21 February 2011

What began as a specific rural issue soon became identified with by an urban constituency, as prominent members of environmental organisations aligned themselves with community action groups. Localised community action groups quickly attracted the attention of environmental campaigners and political aspirants from all party persuasions. Drew Hutton, co-founder of the Green Party in Queensland, resigned from the party to become a vocal advocate against further energy development in the Surat Basin and has helped organise several public events, protests and rallies throughout the Surat and in Brisbane. This growing alliance between rural community action groups and city-based environmental campaigners has realigned what began as localised actions. The alliance strategy of turning to lobby groups was presented as the only way that farmers and landholders could protest against the characterised 'divide and conquer' tactics of resource companies. For many landholders, it has been their participation in actions such as rallies and protests that has brought a sense of community and solidarity in what has been dubbed a 'David and Goliath' battle. However, the methods community action groups have taken to get their message out into the public arena has differed and is worth further analysis to vet out not only the efficacy of their actions but also the contests over maintaining support for continued mobilisation.

Mapping the continuum of dissent

While BSA has chosen a route of issuing media statements, sitting on government and resource company committees, and presenting at regional and industry organised conferences, other community action groups have taken a more radical approach and are actively protesting further coal and coal seam gas developments in their regions. Members from Save Our Darling Downs (SODD) organised a rally in May 2010 to launch their local action group. A 500 strong crowd of farmers, environmentalists and concerned citizens met at Waverley to take part in a peaceful rally against the expansion of the CSG mining industry. Waverley was the first intensive cropping property on the black soil of Cecil Plains to be approached by an energy company (Arrow Energy) looking to prove methane gas reserves are in the area by sinking 6-pilot wells. In a sign of protest, farmers mapped out the location of the proposed exploration CSG wells in the paddock, then surrounded the field with heavy farming machinery as a show of solidarity. The protest was captured by the television media and a strong message was conveyed to urban and rural viewers. The protest called on the Queensland Premier to issue a moratorium on all further coal seam gas developments until scientific research proved that there would be no detrimental impacts on groundwater and current land use practices, and until systems could be put in place to adequately deal with the water and salt by-products of the CSG extraction process. The SODD group made it quite clear that if the State Government was not prepared to slow down coal seam gas developments in the region, then they would impose a moratorium of their own.

SODD has done this by challenging the Queensland Government's decision to grant Arrow Energy an environmental authority (EA) to explore for coal seam gas on the Darling Downs in the Land Court. The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) has offered to provide strategic advice and help underwrite the cost of the legal action through its Australian Farmers' Fighting Fund (Lloyd 2011). In August 2010, 60 members of SODD attended a protest rally, organised by the Six Degrees Collective at Friends of the

Earth, outside Parliament House in Brisbane. In November 2010, representatives from SODD, Friends of the Earth joined and several Surat-based action groups met again outside Parliament House to launch Lock the Gate; a non-violent, non-cooperation campaign against mining companies, which encourages all landowners to commit civil disobedience by refusing access to coal and coal seam gas mining companies.

While the majority of local action groups discussed consist largely of graziers and grain producers, another group of landholders have been impacted by CSG development in the Surat Basin. Fourteen rural residential blocks located between Tara and Chinchilla were approached by Queensland Gas Company (QGC), who wanted to run a 16 km pipeline through the Tara Estates to take coal seam gas from existing wells to their Kenya processing plant. The residents of these lifestyle blocks turned to the national Lock the Gate Alliance for assistance. In March 2011, Tara Estates residents and environmental campaigners planned what became an 80-day protest and blockade to protect native forests along the proposed pipeline route. The People's Blockade significantly delayed work by QGC, who had planned to finish the pipeline within 21 days. QGC was not able to complete the pipeline work through the Tara Estates until June 2011. The non-violent direct actions at Tara generated a lot of media attention, but not all of it was positive for the landholders. Local businesses represented by the Tara Futures Group are working to change the public's perceptions of "Tara as demonstration central" (*Surat Basin News*, 2011). The group has recently joined the Surat Basin Corporation and is trying to get the message out that Tara is "just a nice quiet little country town" (*Surat Basin News*, 2011).

Contesting visions of the Surat Basin Future Directions

There are definitely competing messages coming out of the Surat Basin. On the one hand, there have been vocal protests against further energy resource development, with organisations from AgForce to the Lock the Gate Alliance asking for a moratorium on CSG development until the science (variably defined) and legislation catches up. On the other hand, the regional councils and progress associations are pushing the Surat Basin as the energy capital of Queensland by hosting conferences, workshops, business investment tours, and energy and mining expos. The prospect of billion dollar expenditures and up to 12,500 jobs within the region as energy projects ramp up production is hard not to get excited about. However:

farmers are unconvinced by government and industry assurances that when 40,000 gas wells are drilled and billions of litres of salty water brought to the surface, that precious underground aquifers, the Great Artesian Basin and quality farmland will not be irrevocably harmed (Courtney 2011).

At the Federal Government level the Senate's Rural Affairs and Transport Committee held meetings in Dalby (18 July 2011), Roma (19 July 2011) and Brisbane (20 July 2011) as part of its inquiry into the social, economic and environmental impacts of mining coal seam gas in the Murray Darling Basin (including both the Surat Basin and the Liverpool Plains of northern New South Wales). All of the community protection groups as well as several individuals sent in submissions and were invited to present at the inquiry. The common message was:

for Federal Government to take over regulation of the industry, for tougher consumer protection laws, for better compensation deals for farmers, for the removal of confidentiality clauses from gas contracts and for a blanket ban of CSG operations on prime agricultural land (Courtney 2011).

Conclusion

This research began in 2009 as a mapping exercise attempting to characterise the Surat Basin and identify key stakeholders in CSG resource developments, including existing community and landholder groups. It is probably no surprise that what was uncovered was an evolving, shifting web of groups and alliances with differing narratives competing for legitimacy. Farmers and other landholders in the Surat Basin who have been caught up in the push for energy development are often unwilling participants; reluctant activists as their actions have been radicalised in order to be heard by a Government that actively supports the energy industry. Localised action groups formed in the Surat Basin despite a clear strategy by Government to engage in a level of consultation with communities and to set in place, albeit sometimes slowly, the mechanisms to address concerns over rapid CSG development. Initially, these action groups represented local communities, with neighbouring farmers meeting to discuss the CSG developments as word of the impending changes spread. These small groups tended to present a myriad of positions in regards to CSG developments based on the knowledge of what was likely to be developed, the individual circumstances of the farmer and local community factors. The development of broader alliances appears to have occurred in conjunction with a broadening of interest in the localised developments and in part due to the cross regional scale of the CSG industry development. The formation of the Green/farmer alliance with Friends of the Earth offering substantive support to the farmers' protest and the establishment of links with national and international organisations increased the knowledge base of the community action groups. Basic responses to the CSG developments have become 'considered' blueprints for sustainable regional development matching the glossy public relations releases from the international CSG consortiums. The stakes have become high with the likelihood of State and Federal elections being influenced by these developments.

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