



Alice Springs – Amber Driver

Please be advised that this transcript was produced from a video recording. As such, the quality and accuracy of this transcript cannot be guaranteed and the Inquiry is not liable for any errors.

4 August 2017

Alice Springs Convention Centre, Alice Springs

Speakers: Amber Driver

Amber Driver: All right. My name is Amber Driver. I'm from Elkedra Station, northeast of Alice Springs, and if you don't mind I'll just read off my submission.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: No, absolutely, that's fine.

Amber Driver: Thank you. Good morning to the inquiry chair, Justice Pepper, and everybody that is here with us today or observing via livestream for the public hearing for the scientific inquiry into hydraulic fracturing of onshore and unconventional reservoirs in Northern Territory. My presentation this morning is only brief, and I'm addressing this inquiry into hydraulic fracturing from a non-scientific background in layman's terms that are understood within the pastoral industry and on behalf of a fourth generation family-owned and operated cattle station.

A brief outline before I get into my questions. The National Livestock Identification System, NLIS, are required to notify authorities of cattle movements, whether it be moving stock to sale, adjustment, or relocation. If any anomalies are detected in our beef at any point along the supply chain, the authorities can trace the product back to the specific property and even to the specific paddock.

Cattle producers across central Northern Territory are fortunate to be able to say we produce and have the ability to produce organic grass-fed beef for our chosen markets. We have the capacity to produce a product, that's cattle, for live export, store markets, feed lots, stud stocks, local meat works, and the like, that is free from any form of hormone growth promotants, drenches, injections, sprays, or antibiotics. Not only that, we can say that they, the cattle, are grazing on pastures that are free from fertilisers, sprays, defoliants, insecticides, and the like.

When I extend the fact that, in Central Australia, we can produce a quality, clean, organic, free-range product one step further, I am at the point where I address water quality. This is where my question to you, Justice Pepper and the board of the scientific inquiry, sits. Up until this point, pastoralists have been in control of what their cattle eat, pastures free from chemical,



breathing clean, fresh air, and now with hydraulic fracturing occurring within our properties, we have lost the control of assuring that our water remains free from chemical residue. Given that cattle producers are in an industry in Central Australia that delivers clean, organic beef to Australia and markets all over the world, what ramifications do you see for our industry if well integrity through hydraulic fracturing is compromised and our water supply is no longer delivering clean drinking water to our stock, free of chemical residue?

Any trace of chemical residue from hydraulic fracturing detected in our beef will void our organic status and, in turn, will destroy not only our business and reputation as organic beef producers, it has the potential to affect the entire Central Australian beef industry. How do you, or do you even know, when your wells have been compromised and there is chemical leaking into our water supplies that we rely on for our stock to drink? Do you have an obligation to pastoralists who rely on the flow of chemical-free water to remain chemical-free? And that's chemical residue. To protect our business of producing organic beef, what safeguards do you have in place to ensure that, if there is hydraulic fracturing occurring on properties or within our water basin, and the wells are compromised, you are not shutting down an entire industry that relies and stands by its branding, organic-certified beef?

I put it to you that hydraulic fracturing is gambling with our business, our future livelihood, and that of our children and the generation to follow, and the integrity of an organic industry in Central Australia. Organic certification is being sought after and gained by many pastoralists. If hydraulic fracturing causes chemical residue on a property that has not yet applied for organic certification, this would end any chance of that property ever gaining organic certification. In turn, this would limit future growth and opportunity. The ramifications are extreme.

An example of worth of organic status can be explained as follows: On the 19th of April 2016, a price grid sent out by Teys Beenleigh meat works in Queensland offered the following money. For a 700-kilo bullock, non-organic certification yielded \$2421. The same 700-kilo bullock with organic status yielded \$3196. This is a 32% premium, which equates to \$775 per head. Central Australian pastoralists have the capacity to sell 600 bullocks per year, and if the organic status becomes void due to chemical residue due to hydraulic fracturing, the pastoralists stand to lose the organic premium of up to \$465,000 per year. \$465,000 per year.

In my opinion, we cannot take a drill and see approach. This will be at our peril when chemical residue contaminates our properties and product. It will be too little, too late for our businesses when data collection that can only occur when you are in the field exploring shows that our water has traces of chemicals only associated with hydraulic fracturing. Thank you.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Thank you very much.

Amber Driver:

I do have two copies.



- Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Excellent. If you can hand a copy of that to any of the people sitting at that table, and that will be loaded onto our website. Thank you very much for those figures and for that perspective as well, which we haven't been given so far, so we're very appreciative of that, yes. Any questions? Yes, Dr. Jones?
- Dr David Jones: Yes, Ms. Driver. I think we all are acutely aware of the possibility of contamination by this industry by water or by air. Do you have any evidence from your perhaps research about how the organic industry could perhaps be compromised elsewhere, for example from US or Canadian experience? That would be very-
- Amber Driver: From what experience?
- Dr David Jones: From US or Canadian experience, for example where there is an industry? Or even inside Queensland, the CSG industry.
- Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Or South Australia.
- Dr David Jones: Or South Australia. Do you have any evidence from your industry colleagues or in other areas of this issue having arisen?
- Amber Driver: I can do that information and look for that information, but I've certainly seen, through Queensland and through a lot of social media sources and news sources, that is a problem. I can't give you a scientific answer to that, but I know that it has been a shared problem throughout Queensland that I have seen myself.
- Dr David Jones: I guess it's not necessarily even so much a quantitative scientific measure, it's perhaps just the perception of your customers that something mightn't be right.
- Amber Driver: Well, really, from where I see, it's the potential of the well integrity. How do you know if your wells have been compromised? We don't know because we can't see them. This is a predicament, I feel, that we're in as a family. Even if hydraulic fracturing is not occurring on our property, if it's on a neighbouring property or within the water basin and the well integrity has been compromised with a chemical residue, it's an unknown to me what you're going to do or what's going to happen, because once that water is pumped and our cattle are drinking it, it's too late for us. I'm answering your question with a question, I realise, but ...
- Dr David Jones: Well, basically what you're saying is adopt a precautionary principle rather than waiting until it's too late.
- Amber Driver: And how do you find out? That's the thing. As a pastoralist, as a pastoralist, how do I get that information? Do I have to go to my bores every day and test it? Is that up to me to do that? I'm not the one fracturing. Is it up to me



to add that to my job list every day, just to check that the well integrities of something that may be occurring in a area is not affecting me.

Dr David Jones: Yes, you're quite right about that onus of proof and where it lies in terms of the margin regime.

Amber Driver: Yeah, and that is also a concern.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Yes, Dr. Beck?

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: Thank you very much for your detailed presentation and alerting to us to the issue of organic produces. Can you give some indication of how many organic beef producers there are in the Territory, and what the herd number would be?

Amber Driver: I would love to give you those figures and I think ... I can't accurately do that without gathering some information for you. I'm not sure how to go about doing that, but I could certainly start getting on the phone and getting those numbers and asking the producers in our area. Organic certification isn't an overnight process. It can take up to five years.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: And it can be lost very easily, very quickly.

Amber Driver: Absolutely, so in my point of view we have to be really mindful of that fact because if we're talking about developing and developing the north and Australia, within various ways, there's a big question mark that hangs over this because if we do have chemical residue come through hydraulic fracturing, you're not developing our industry.

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: I well understand the point you're making.

Amber Driver: I'm going to make a note of that, actually, to produce some numbers for you on how many producers are currently organic-certified and how many are in that process, and try and get a snapshot of some numbers for you.

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: That would be very helpful, thank you. I know this is not going to give you any comfort, but I think it was last week we were visiting Queensland and we went to a number of properties that had hydraulic fracturing going on. One of the properties had 60 CSG coal seam gas wells, and it was a feedlot producer, so there was close integration. Badly they weren't organic-certified but there was a close interaction between CSG wells and beef feedlot producers, and we saw that in a number of other properties too. As I said, it doesn't give you any comfort, but just to let you know that there is a side-by-side development in terms of gas wells and beef production.

Amber Driver: Yeah, I take your point and I understand that, but I'm talking about organic.

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: I know.



Amber Driver: I don't know, because I don't know their situation, but it's a very strict set of guidelines and there are a number of avenues that you have to get through to gain those certifications. In Central Australia, we really are an anomaly in that area because our pastures aren't fertilised, our water is clean, and our cattle do not require any drenches, dips, worming. There is no import of a chemical substance in the beef collectively in Central Australia, so it's a big market that doesn't really occur much throughout Australia. More and more, pastoralists are coming on board within organic movement and doing the hard yards getting these certifications. Yeah, hence the presentation today.

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: Thank you.

Hon. Justice

Rachel Pepper: Again, if you're able to obtain this information, give us an idea in due course of how much this industry is worth, that would be quite useful as well. Thank you. It's really important, thank you. Yes, Professor Hart.

Professor

Barry Hart AM: Could I just probe a little bit more in terms of the certification? In fact, if you have a copy of the guidelines and could provide it to us, that'd be very useful. But just wondering, rightly, you've pointed out the potential risks of contamination of the groundwaters and the implications for the pastoral industry. I'm just wondering whether the guidelines, the organic certification guidelines, have any mention at all of water quality?

Amber Driver: Look, we have to prove, and under strict testing, that our meat has no form of chemical residue in it. Doesn't matter how it's going to get into the meat, but that's the major concern for us. At the start of my presentation where I talked about the National Livestock Identification System, if along any point in the supply chain there is testing for chemical residue and it turns up, this could be on your shelf in Coles in Sydney, through this NLIS system they have the potential to trace it back to the meat works that processed, to the track that took it there, to the property it came from, to the person they bought it off, to the paddock it was born in. That's a National Livestock Identification System, so really, any point along that chain, that's why I added that in. It's just to provide you, I'm not sure if that's-

Professor

Barry Hart AM: No, no, that's fine. I mean, it's not that the groundwater is devoid of chemicals. It does have chemicals in it. Not contaminants in that sense. One of the issues that we have in terms of applying a risk approach to it is we need to, taking your leaky well example, we need to assess what's the likelihood, the probability of that occurring, and then we need to think, or get as much quantitative information as we can, about what's the consequences? Then we've got a potential of who's going to use that water, let's say contaminated water. It's the pastoral industry, so that's where your beef comes into consideration. It's the aquatic ecology, and that's humans potentially. That's where what you're just been giving us information on is very useful in terms of us trying to work out what other chemicals that might come from hydraulic fracking into the water column, into the groundwater resource, and then potentially then off to the beef. We're coming back a stage, if you like, on your process that you say certification



requires, anywhere it occurs, we're very focused on the water component, it's very focused on drinking.

Amber Driver: Yeah.

Professor
Barry Hart AM: Stock drinking water.

Amber Driver: Yeah. For human consumption with the water, a lot of these bores aren't, you just can't drink it because of the minerals that are there and it's not drinkable, so it would have to go through filtration. But when we pump it for our stock, they're just drinking it. Yeah.

Professor
Barry Hart AM: Thank you.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Thank you. Yes, Dr. Beck.

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: Can I just clarify that a little further. In the organic certification, I'm not sure whether they ... Speaking upon your point of no chemical residues, I'm not sure in the organic certification, and I'd appreciate your advice on this, whether there is no chemical residues or whether, in the certification process, specific chemicals are listed that aren't able to be present in the beef at the point of sale.

Amber Driver: Yeah, that's something that I can't answer for you straight away without doing some more research.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Sorry, I think we keep asking you questions and loading you up with tasks, but you're the first person who's come here to talk about this, and as you can tell we're now very interested.

Amber Driver: Yeah, and I will endeavour to capture all of the questions and provide you with some good information with references, because I think when I have these discussions with other pastoralists on both sides, ones that have been organically certified and there's a lot of different organic certification that you can get, it's not just one. There's a lot of different hoops that you have to ... a lot of different things that you can get certified for, so I definitely will be capturing what is required and what people have, their experiences have been so far.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: I know it's very complicated. It takes a long time, and as you know, as I said before, that it is very easily lost and very quickly and easily lost. Yes, we'd be very appreciative of that. We have been to Hayfield and Maryfield pastoral stations and had a look at, spent time with the lessees there and talked to those people and toured the properties, but we haven't had any experience at all with any organic pastoral leases, so that would be very, very useful.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Anything else at all? Again, thank you very much for your very interesting



and I think very important presentation. We appreciate it.

Amber Driver: Thank you. Would you like me to submit this now and then follow up with some extra information?

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. If you just give it to a member of the task force, and it will get entered into our system and uploaded onto the website.
Thank you very much.

Amber Driver: Thank you very much for hearing me today.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Thank you for coming.