



Alice Springs – Allan O’Keefe, Marilyn O’Keefe and Jasmin O’Keefe

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.

3 August 2017

Alice Springs Convention Centre, Alice Springs

Speakers: Allan O’Keefe, Marilyn O’Keefe and Jasmin O’Keefe

Alan O’Keefe: Good afternoon, my name is Alan O’Keefe. I’m representing myself and my family. I’m a member of the Central Australian Frack Free Alliance, but I’m not speaking on behalf of them, I’m speaking on behalf of myself.

Justice Pepper: Thank you. The other people at the table please?

Marilyn: Good afternoon, my name is Marilyn O’Keefe. I’m basically here as a support person. This is my husband on my left and my granddaughter on my right.

Justice Pepper: Thank you, I’ll just get your granddaughter to say her name, please.

Jasmine: Hello, my name is Jasmine and I’m representing myself.

Justice Pepper: Sorry, I didn’t hear that.

Jasmine: Hello, my name is Jasmine and I’m representing myself.

Justice Pepper: Thank you very much. Yes, please.

Jasmine: Hello and good afternoon to everyone here, including those who are watching online. Thank you for taking some time out of your day to listen to what I have to say. Three weeks ago, my grandfather approached me and asked if I could speak today to voice my own concerns about hydraulic fracking. I first became aware about hydraulic fracking two years ago, when my grandparents viewed the documentary Frack Men. To be honest, in the beginning I was unconcerned about fracking as I did not think that it would affect me, the environment, or future generations.

I want to start by saying that Alice Springs is located in the desert near the centre of Australia, and it is a town that relies heavily on tourism. We have just come through our hottest July on record, which means that the people, the animals and the plants need more access to fresh water. All of our water comes from the Amadeus Basin. This is clean, pure drinking water that is located underground and is not renewable. According to the Australian government department of environment and natural resources, the water is not replenishing at a rate that is sustainable for the near future. The



Amadeus Basin not only supplies water to Alice Springs, but also to the surrounding stations and indigenous communities. The Australian national average of water that one person uses per day is 90 litres. The average water usage for the 27,000 people that live in this town equates to 2.5 million litres per day. This does not include the surrounding stations or communities.

When I found out that it takes one to two million litres of water to drill a well, and that said well could be fracked up to 20 times with the usage of roughly 14 million litres of water, I was upset. I was disappointed that these mining companies could waste an entire town's days worth of water to drill only one well. A main concern of mine is that our water will no longer be safe for consumption once the hydraulic fracking takes place, as none of these companies can guarantee nor confirm that the bore water that we rely so heavily on for life will not be contaminated.

The mining companies that practise fracking have no obligations to disclose what chemicals they use. The National Toxic's Network has stated that only two out of the 25 most commonly used chemicals in Australian hydraulic fracking have been tested by the National Industrial Chemicals Notifications and Assessment Scheme. That by allowing these chemicals to go unchecked, permits these mining companies to pollute our environment with the possibility of irreversible damage. I question all mining giants what plans and provisions have they in place to correct any damages to our water supply and to our environment. I challenge any of these mining corporations to drink the same water once these chemicals have been mixed with our once pure drinking water.

Yesterday, I spoke to a former miner from the company [inaudible]. He wished to remain anonymous, and I quote him directly. "Most mining companies can afford fines. Most fines only equate to a couple of minutes of production time a day. When mining companies assess the financial risk, they equate into their profits to receive a certain number of fines, regardless whether that money is used or not." I ask everyone who is listening, if these companies already put money aside for any fines that they may or may not receive, then why are they not held accountable for their actions and made to clean up after themselves? I call upon the indigenous leaders of this land to voice their opinions and concerns as they are drinking the same water as you and I. As I address the people in this room and those who are viewing online, who would come to our town if you couldn't drink the water? Would you stop if you were uncertain about the contamination?

As a young person and a local resident of the Northern Territory, I call upon our Chief Minister Michael Gunner to drink a glass of water sourced near a fracking well if he believes that it is safe. My children's children will not be using the gas out of any of your mines, but my children's children will be drinking the water out of this ground. I ask you, Michael Gunner, to please ban fracking. Thank you all for listening.

Justice Pepper: Thank you.



Alan O'Keeffe:

Good afternoon. Thank you for allowing me to speak to the panel on my concerns in relation to hydraulic fracking. My name is Alan O'Keeffe, and I am a long term resident of Alice Springs. Also a business owner involved in the building and tourism industries. Both these industries are family owned and operated. I came to the territory in 1980 with my wife, who is with me today, and two children. We have a total of five children and 16 grandchildren, all of which I represent here today. At this stage, I would like to point out that all of my family are totally opposed to hydraulic fracking. 27 years ago, like most tourists, we had planned to stay for around three to six months, depending on the availability of employment. Shortly after arriving, I was involved in some building works of the Desert Rose Inn in Alice. During the construction of this project, I became interested in the tourism industry, and consequently purchased an accommodation house. After a short time, we decided to expand the premises to a 29 room motel, of which I am still a director of.

My major concern is that if the Northern Territory government allows fracking gas fields across the territory, it would have a disastrous effect on the tourist industry. The Northern Territory contains so many unique landscapes, from Uluru in the south to Kakadu in the north. It makes no sense to put these natural sites at risk. Our well established tourist industry employs 6284, with the majority of local residents. Tourism is a six figure employer in the Northern Territory, which in turn helps to keep the community stable and prosperous.

As a comparison, the mining industry employs only 3299 people, ranking at 11th place. We assume that the majority of these employees are fly in, fly out. This information comes from the 2011 census research by the Australian Institute. There are also a large number of indigenous owned organisations that provide employment for indigenous and non-indigenous persons. Tourism is continually expanding, with more visitors increasing year by year. These are figures we have established from our own property. Claims that gas royalties are the territory's only hope to bring the independence from Canberra are misguided. Again, this is research from the Australian Institute. Total mining gas revenues, sorry, total mining gas royalties contribute just 3% of the Northern Territory government revenue. Even doubling the size of this industry would not significantly change the nature of the Northern Territory budget.

If unconventional gas in the NT was successful as it is in Queensland, the government revenue would only expand by 1%. Gas industry claims of major economic benefits for the Northern Territory from unconventional gas development should be treated with scepticism. Unconventional gas and increased exports have caused policy chaos in the rest of Australia, with poor results for consumers, tax payers, shareholders and most importantly the environment. Gas development rarely brings major revenue streams to government, large employment numbers or positive benefits to the community or other industries.



The next point of concern is the health and wellbeing of all citizens. A recent summary of health risks of unconventional gas development, which requires hydraulic fracking, has been published in Environmental Science and Technology. This is a very rapid, evolving area, and the recent publication identified 685 papers established between 2009 and 2015 in peer reviewed scientific journals that are relevant to assessing impacts of hydraulic fracking. Of the papers, 84% contained findings that indicate public health hazards, elevated risks, and adverse health outcomes. 69% of water studies showed actual potential of water contamination. 87% air quality studies indicate elevated air pollution.

My question to the panel and our chief minister Mr Gunner is why would we risk damaging tourism, when a well managed tourism industry could continue indefinitely? The second question is how do you sell your hydraulic fracking to the tourist industry? For the benefit of the panel and the chief minister who may have forgotten what natural beauty there is here, I will quote from the Planet website referring to Northern Territory. It goes on to say, "A land of stark beauty, sacred Aboriginal sites and space. The Northern Territory has always stood apart from the rest of Australia. Vast deserts, wetlands, monsoonal rains, red rock gorges and raging rivers spark the spirit of the adventure in all those who visit. These natural features enable the local Aboriginal people to preserve their traditional way of life. Today travellers flock here from around the world to see these spectacular sites, and learn more about the fascinating culture of tribes that have thrived in this rugged land for thousands of years.

The Red Centre, and its land of parched desert gorges and striking rock formations. Uluru, its iconic red monolith, is one of the region's most famous features. The Top End encompasses the World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park, beautiful Litchfield National Park, Katherine Gorge and the aboriginal settlements of Arnhem Land. Also at the Top End, lies multiculturalism Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory.

In closing, I sincerely hope the panel and the NT government consider the viewpoint of our community. I am one voice, and I represent many. Thank you.

Justice Pepper: Thank you.

Alan O'Keefe: That's all, thank you.

Justice Pepper: Oh right, thank you. Sorry. I think you appear to have relied on a number of references that you've obviously got your hands on. In your presentation there seemed to be a number of references to some scientific papers and other articles. We would be very much obliged, appreciative if you could give those references to the task force in due course.

Alan O'Keefe: Yes.

Justice Pepper: Thank you very much.



- Alan O'Keefe: At another time, you say or?
- Justice Pepper: Whenever you're ready, if you see any one of the people at the table just behind you there, either today or they can give you details you could send them in. Again, we'd very much appreciate getting hold of those papers.
- Alan O'Keefe: Thank you.
- Justice Pepper: Thank you very much. Any questions for the O'Keeffes?
- Dr Anderson: Yes.
- Justice Pepper: Doctor Anderson.
- Dr Anderson: Thanks Mr O'Keefe, and I just want to ask a question about the tourism. The interim report well recognises the iconic outback landscapes of the NT, and their importance for the tourism industry. I wanted to put this scenario to you, all of you actually and see what you think. What if there was a proposal to develop a shale gas industry in an area that doesn't have tourists, that is not in a National Park or anywhere near National Park, and has the support of local communities including local Aboriginal communities? What would your...
- Alan O'Keefe: [crosstalk] Well, my view is I'm totally opposed to fracking in any form, anywhere within the Northern Territory.
- Marilyn: That's the viewpoint of all of us.
- Dr Anderson: Thank you.
- Justice Pepper: Yes sir, Professor Priestly?
- Prof. Priestly: The panel has been looking at and contrasting the impact of the industry in Queensland, which is different in some ways but have similarities in others, to try and gain some insight as to the experience from the development of the industry in Queensland. In relation to tourism, are you aware of any evidence of an impact on tourism in Queensland as a result of the development of that industry?
- Alan O'Keefe: No, I tried to get some information on that prior to coming here, but the information we had that it wasn't close to the areas where the fracking has taken place. Wasn't close to any tourist icons like it is in central Australia. From that list I read you'll realise there's probably six icons here in central Australia which would be all affected. My short answer to that is no, I haven't any other info on tourism.
- Prof. Priestly: Thank you.
- Alan O'Keefe: Sorry.



- Justice Pepper: Yes, Professor Hart.
- Prof. Hart: You made the statement earlier on that shale gas, hydraulic fracking will have a disastrous impact on tourism, the industry. I appreciate your feeling, your deep held feeling. But all of the icons you mentioned, Kakadu and the like, and certainly Uluru, were all areas that are very unlikely to experience hydraulic fracking. Certainly from the top end, there's very little gas. You've read the interim report, and we're focused initially anyway...
- Alan O'Keefe: Yes I have.
- Prof. Hart: On Beetaloo. So, would you be prepared, it's almost a similar question to my colleague here, that you're talking about tourism industry outside of the area that's, if indeed the moratorium's lifted, the area that would be most likely to be developed. Do you still hold the same view? I mean, you still hold the same view you don't want fracking.
- Alan O'Keefe: Yes, exactly.
- Prof. Hart: I'm just trying to tease out, you said a disastrous effect on tourism. I guess I'm seeking to get some evidence on that.
- Alan O'Keefe: Well, I'm saying that with the disastrous effect, to get to Beetaloo which is where you're referring to, they'll have to either go through Darwin or through Alice Springs.
- Prof. Hart: Sure.
- Alan O'Keefe: There's going to be some impact on those places.
- Prof. Hart: Okay. This is transport and things like that?
- Alan O'Keefe: Exactly. It's a bit like owning a house in an area close by where the area is disastrous.
- Jasmine: In my speech I spoke mostly about the water supply. I believe that if there was a fracture in a well and it did contaminate the water, as I said, as a tourist would you stop in this town if you were uncertain if you could drink our water?
- Prof. Hart: Thank you.
- Justice Pepper: Thank you very much for your presentation.