



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

Press Conference

22 October 2010

Subjects: EPBC Approvals – Queensland Gas Corporation – Santos – Queensland coal seam gas projects – Macquarie Island

E&OE only

TONY BURKE: I announced some time ago that today would be the deadline for making a number of decisions under the EPBC Act. A few moments ago I concluded those decisions and I wanted to take the opportunity now to announce them.

Two major coal seam gas projects in Queensland, one for the Queensland Gas Company and one for Santos. They're a long term development of coal seam gas fields in southern Queensland for export of LNG from the Port of Gladstone. There's also a major program of dredging proposed by Gladstone Ports Corporation.

After rigorous assessment and considering all relevant matters I have decided that these projects can go ahead without unacceptable impacts on matters protected under national environmental law.

While there are significant economic benefits which must be a consideration in my decision, my focus has been on protecting environmental matters. I've also considered potential impacts on agricultural land among other economic and social matters.

We must protect the Great Artesian Basin, our threatened species, our waterways and the Great Barrier Reef.

Today's announcement involves more than 300 conditions which provide these environmental protections and allow the jobs and investment in Queensland to go ahead. I repeat that. Today's announcement involves more than 300 conditions which provide the environmental protections and allow the jobs and investment in Queensland to go ahead.

It's the first coal seam gas projects to be approved under national environmental law. It will be the largest coal seam gas operations in Australia. The rigorous assessment included environmental impact statements for each project, the Queensland Co-ordinator General's report on each project, a period of public consultation and expert advice received both from my department and from Geoscience Australia.

There's more I could add but given the deadlines that you're under I probably should open it to questions at that point.

QUESTION: You mention that there's 300 conditions, are you going to be releasing those conditions and can you tell us a few of those conditions?

TONY BURKE: Okay. A lot of that information should shortly be available on the website. And when I say 300 conditions, for the QGC proposal there's 300 there, there's another 300 for Santos, but I refer to them as 300 because they're very similar in many ways, the conditions. There's a further 52 relating to the dredging proposal.

One of the critical ones I was just asked to refer to is how to do we deal with the issue of water within coal seams. There has been a concern as to whether or not there would be an issue of backfill from the Great Artesian Basin. The report from Geoscience Australia made clear that they recommended a precautionary approach on this because for any individual project they viewed it as very limited in terms of danger. There was a concern as to what the cumulative impact might be.

There are procedures which you'll see in the conditions on the companies where a testing regime has to be taken into account, effectively to work out whether or not the seams are porous. If there is a finding beyond trigger levels that they are in fact porous and are interconnected to the Great Artesian Basin, in those circumstances they would have to be re-pressurised, that may involve re-injection.

QUESTION: So will you be able to guarantee farmers in the area that their water will be safe?

TONY BURKE: We have taken a highly precautionary approach here when it comes to the issues around water.

QUESTION: Will any of the conditions change the economics of the project or change the size or the scope of the business plan for these gas projects?

TONY BURKE: Oh there's no doubt these are tough conditions. The companies will speak for themselves on what any of this means in terms of the specific phrasing of that question. They are tough conditions and I have a job as Environment

Minister to make sure that the values protected under the EPBC Act become part of any decision I make.

QUESTION: Why didn't you consider what's happened at the [Indistinct] wells this week in your considerations here to ensure that that doesn't happen, whatever's happened there doesn't happen at these two projects?

TONY BURKE: On that issue I spoke to the Queensland Environment Minister shortly after that announcement had been made. My department then engaged directly with the Queensland department. We don't manage in any way or provide approvals for the particular project that you refer to and there was no evidence of there being similar issues for the approvals that were before us.

QUESTION: Minister just on another issue, what's your response to a Government baiting program that's caused the deaths of 430 birds on Macquarie Island?

TONY BURKE: Oh on Macquarie Island there - there is a significant project there in terms of ferals, and a management program that I've participated with. I don't have all the details of that program in front of me, I'll be happy to provide further information on that. Suffice to say anything that involves management of invasive species always involves a delicate balance to try to make sure that you're not having a significant impact on the actual native species in the area. That balance is part of that particular project.

QUESTION: Given the tough conditions that you've announced today, do you expect these projects still to go ahead and have the companies indicated that to you?

TONY BURKE: I would presume that the companies were well aware of the constraints of federal environmental law, and certainly the decision that's been made is completely consistent with the federal environmental law that I have to deal with as Environment Minister.

These are tough conditions, particularly the conditions relating to water, but the decision beyond that is one for the companies. I don't think it's appropriate for me to be speaking on their behalf.

QUESTION: Minister, you said that as the environmental concerns were balanced by significant economic benefits. Can you outline those?

TONY BURKE: On the economic benefits, on the total number of jobs and issues like that, I do think it's appropriate for the company to speak on that directly, rather than me. But if I can give some indications of the figures that have been provided to us - so I'm not associating, I'm not assigning or locking into them.

But the information that I've been advised of, for QGC, it's expected to add \$2.6 billion annually to

the Queensland gross state product. More than 4000 direct jobs during the peak of construction for the Santos project. Around \$4.1 billion annually to Queensland gross state product. Around 4300 full time equivalent jobs at the peak of construction.

QUESTION: Is that for both projects, the jobs?

TONY BURKE: That's right. I've given you the QGC jobs figure, and then I've given you the Santos jobs figure.

QUESTION: Well with that sort of money involved Minister surely you would be wary that the companies are now intending to pull the pin because of this announcement? I mean what's your understanding? Will the project go ahead or not?

TONY BURKE: I believe we have come up with the right balance in protecting the environmental values that I'm expected to protect, as Environment Minister.

But I'm simply not going to make an announcement on behalf of a private company.

QUESTION: Have you spoken to companies before you've spoken to us?

TONY BURKE: Any communication with the companies has been done by my department, not directly by me. I think that's the appropriate way, because under the outcome I received the advice from the department. I did go out some weeks ago and inspect the projects.

At that time I had an opportunity to speak to some people from the QGC. But that was in advance of us getting to the actual conditions that we're at now.

QUESTION: Are you confident that the conditions will ensure that there will be no more opposition from green groups?

TONY BURKE: I think it's a brave environment minister whoever suggests on any issue that there'll be no more objections from any green groups following the decision.

There are some people who simply don't want a project like this to go ahead.

My obligation is not to try to prevent a project. My obligation is, try to protect environmental values. I believe that's what this decision reflects.

QUESTION: Minister, do you have a response to the CSIRO report out today saying that despite recent rainfall, that south-east SA is still in for a lot of dry future?

TONY BURKE: I haven't gone through that particular report on the principle that you've referred to in that. And I said this at a meeting to farmers in Griffith this morning, of irrigators and community members in Griffith this morning. I'm determined that I don't want the next drought to look like the last one.

I think there can be a temptation when you get some good rains for people to say, there you go. Problem fixed.

The Murray-Darling has problems much deeper than that.

We do need to make sure that when you get good rains, you don't suddenly reach for the break on reform.

QUESTION: Back on Macquarie Island. Environmental concerns have previously been raised about the poison that was used. So why was it allowed to be used?

TONY BURKE: Oh look, I've given you the level of detail that I have with me at the moment on that. I'm happy to provide further information. As you'd appreciate today, I simply haven't come with all the latest information on that particular issue.

QUESTION: On the Murray-Darling, the Basin Authority has released the technical information today. Some three or four hundred pages...

TONY BURKE: Oh, that volume two...

QUESTION: Volume two come out 4 pm on Friday. That... yeah, does that information contained in there change the government's position in any way?

TONY BURKE: Oh, one thing you should know is...

QUESTION: Is there anything we should be aware of?

TONY BURKE: Yeah. That information has become available to you in that form and at the same point that it has become available to me. The independence of the authority that I have often referred to is precisely the situation. I indicated to farmers in Griffith this morning my level of frustration about the fact that volume two had not been made available right from the start.

At the National Press Club during the week, some very reasonable questions were asked to the irrigators and the National Farmers Federation about what numbers do you think are reasonable. They quite fairly were unable to answer that - because they weren't able to penetrate the science as to how the initial figures and the guide had been arrived at.

So I'm glad that volume two has been released.

I have to say whether it was released at 4 pm today, or whether it had been released at 9 am today, it doesn't get around the problem that the guide was released without volume two.

Thank you very much.