

Report from Eden by Scott Sledge, NRG President

Some say that the doubt has been removed from Doubtful Creek in Kyogle Shire and the sign at the entrance to the forest track says Eden State Forest, so I'm calling it that. I rather like the idea we're saving Eden. Janaki is determined to leave it a "garden."

A lot has happened since the beginning on 10th January, when the Northern Rivers Guardians combined with Nimbin Environment Centre to establish a protectors' camp on private property near the site proposed for drilling by Metgasco.

The campaign shifted focus to the forest overlooking the area fenced for the drill pad and a vigil began there. Several times the protectors turned away Metgasco workers who came to prepare for a core well meant to test the area for its potential to supply coal seam gas(CSG).

Faced with the same prospect the people at Glenugie, south of Grafton, put up an almighty struggle, so those keen to protect Kyogle had to wait. A clever contraption called *he Traumatron* as used to impede the departure of the drill rig from Glenugie for a full day on Wednesday 6th February and an enormous police contingent (in excess of 75) escorted the rig onto the Eden Creek site.

Complaints about police brutality when the rig was forced in at Glenugie against the firm opposition of residents there seem to have resulted in a more restrained approach to handling the public here at Eden Creek. A few people were rough handled and the police showed where their priority lay when an ambulance was delayed while the convoy of trucks was escorted through a jeering crowd. The injured woman was made to wait, because Metgasco had enough political muscle (all that money spent lobbying state government wasn't waisted!)

Various attempts to impede the progress of the violator rig were made – including traffic jams at a bridge and at Booth's Road intersection - in an atmosphere of foreign invasion, especially when local farmers and Gittabul Origines started shouting "Shame" and "Leave this place." Resistance was inevitable and mostly symbolic because of the overwhelming force of police. Many questioned why our tax dollars were wasted forcing a destructive activity by a private company onto a peaceful population. Meanwhile thieves committed armed robberies in the area. Police refused to tell journalists how much money the task force had cost taxpayers.

Still, the police could not stay in large numbers and the protectors remained, every day obstructing the access to the drill site until enough police could be found to push the people aside. As soon as police went away the blockade was renewed with vigils kept at Booth's Road and Eden Creek Forest entry gates. No business can thrive with such constant delays, and the drill program ended with less than inspiring results. What was announced as 3 wells planned in 4 weeks ended being 2 wells in 3 months! The stock market punished the upstart company by dropping ever lower and by the end of February Metgasco's share price was closing regularly below 10 cents, less than half its value when the drilling program started in November 2012. The pressure of investors not happy with CSG was evident when ANU announced on 26th February that they had sold of their entire 2.5 million shares in Metgasco. Sold at a loss, but hey, what's a few dollars compared to preserving a world fit to live in?

The main protectors' camp had to be moved to the roadside entrance to the forest gate, because Forests NSW decided to "close the forest" to the public. Now called the Forestry Corporation of NSW the staff still take orders from state government. There is now speculation that the Forest is not lawfully "closed." Has someone been lying to us? A special vehicle called "the Simmotron" has been secured to the driveway in front of the gate.

Many of the protectors were local landowners and they kept up a supply of water and food to the camp. A few severe rain periods tested the resolve of the hardy campers, but a rotation of volunteers kept spirits high and a small generator for evening lights and charging phones was donated by new member Steve Smith of Ballina. We had a morale-boosting *Frocks on the Frontline* event on Friday March 2nd.

A mock funeral planned for the rig when it wanted to go back to Queensland on 26th February turned into a day-long celebration of courage for those willing to lock-on, to send a message that destructive mining practices will not be allowed in the Northern Rivers. It was nearly 5 PM when Police removed Ingo Merck from Nimbin and decided not to charge him, but then Gareth Devenish from Mullumbimby locked on to one of the trucks in the convoy. He was removed about 7 PM. Maybe because he had been unlawfully sprayed in the face with capsicum spray Gareth was released without charge. The remainder of the equipment, including the drill rig, have not ventured out and are still stuck in unfriendly country at the second week in March.

Will Metgasco bring more drilling equipment into the Northern Rivers? I don't know, but if they do, I predict new struggles will result. We tell them, "Get a real job... one that doesn't earn you money at the expense of all the rest of us." This region is not for sale. We say to international companies: "There will be more jobs and sustainable profits from industries that provide renewable energy for a viable future." We will stand together as one people : farmers, environmentalists and the Original Australians to secure a future for our children and grandchildren. To these we say, "We won't let you down."