

Report on visit to Gloucester NSW by Daniele and Sledge October 2014

During a 4 day-stay in the magnificent Gloucester valley (located between Taree and the Barrington Tops NP) we learned a lot about the situation there which I will try to summarise for the benefit of NRG members. Imagine an industrial gasfield imposed all around The Channon – or Uki. More than 300 gas wells connected by service roads and pipelines to compressors stations, all leaking methane and poisonous fumes, the water table drawn down and polluted. You will understand why the residents in the beautiful Gloucester Valley are worried.

Add to that the noise and visual shock of an open cut coal mine carving through the green hills and pastures. The situation is further complicated by an approval for a new open-cut coal mine. Rocky Hill Coal mine and AGL's lease areas overlap and both companies seem eager to get in first. Some locals say they support the gas to stop the coal mining while others say they back coal to stop the gas.

Some residents have been convinced that gas and coal will save them from an uncertain economic future, while most seem to fear that their future as clean food producers and a magnet for nature-based tourism will be destroyed.

If the gas project happens, foreign investors may benefit for a few years, then abandon the once-beautiful valley leaving an industrial wasteland when the coal and gas are gone.

The local activists are getting tired after fighting AGL for years. The state government could have granted exemption from mining as the 4 sites approved for fracking are all close to residences, but didn't. The area is considered to be "an experiment" as the complex geology makes gas mining difficult and success unlikely. The Gloucester community believes they are being sacrificed as collateral damage in this experiment.

Groundswell Gloucester is lobbying hard to get politicians to change their minds, and we spent most of our time at an information stall (known as the Peaceful Vigil site) along the main road south of town where rostered volunteers and sundry gather every day to discuss the situation and to share news and views. While we were there people from all over NSW called in including several from the NR, notably musician Luke Vassella and a Bentley bender architect. Bentley has become a by-word for public success over bullying by fossil fuel miners, much admired and much discussed.

We witnessed dismay among the locals because the entire 3.6 km length on Fairbairn Road had suddenly been signposted as "No Stopping" on both sides. Fairbairn Road passes the first test well which AGL has been given permission to frack in the area has been covered by "No Stopping" signs along its entire 3.6

km length. Some 7.2 km of road verge are thereby off limits, and no consultation with locals who live along that road. Karen O'Brien, who runs a herb farm and tea house on Fairbairns Road complained that tour buses who normally park there will now be subject to fines. Karen is quoted in the *Newcastle Herald* (29-9-2014) saying...where else can we go, if they can mine somewhere as beautiful as Gloucester, where in NSW is safe?" The Gloucester Shire mayor told me that the State government had insisted that Council put up the signs and threatened amalgamation or administration of the shire should they refuse.

There is no question that the signs are nothing but a device to thwart the public's democratic right to protest. The usual processes (like the Traffic Committee) have been ignored and no one can explain how this happened. The local police have not requested these signs and there is no suggestion of a safety issue on this dead-end rural road.

I sensed frustration that the local police were being used to force an unpopular industry on this beautiful and productive region. A rudimentary "blockade" of the first fracking site entrance gates has been suspended while locals ponder how to proceed. The brightest ray of hope comes from a decision by Gloucester Shire Council (in a 5-1 vote) this month to allow a Protection Camp to be established on a cattle farm a few kilometres away on Jacks Road. Locals believe they need help from outside the district as the town has only 2500 residents and the entire shire population is only 6000.

Council approval comes with a range of rather strict (and costly) conditions, including a \$26,000 bond to cover any "damage to public property." The only damage imaginable would be tyre tracks on the road verge, so camp organisers believe the bond will be returned and can be used to continue the campaign once the camp is no longer needed. An appeal to the public has been attracting donations, and work on a driveway entrance and landscaping is due to start in a few days once Council officers approve the plans.

The community is being treated as hobbits as the dark forces constantly circle the area roads in company vehicles and remote sensing cameras watch every entrance to all their proposed fracking sites. Some sites have 24-hour security guards. AGL employees are said to be worried Gloucester could turn into another Bentley. And it might. No one can see how this will play out. The company is well-resourced and the community is small, but determined to save the future for their beautiful region.

Those of us who can get there to boost numbers are warmly welcomed and I recommend that blockade supporters from outside the district consult the Groundswell Gloucester web site and contact Davo on 0427 236 782 (email gatewatch2014@gmail.com) to see what they can bring. It is a good place to fight the gas ghouls. See **Save Gloucester** and **Gloucester Protection Camp** FB pages for up-to-date info.

If you can't get to Gloucester, you could help by donating \$\$\$s to the campaign and/or lobbying the NSW government: Premier Mike Baird and Planning Minister Pru Goward. Maybe start with Police Minister Stuart Ayres (email =office@ayers.minister.nsw.gov.au) Phone 02 8574 6500. Ask him if AGL leaned on police to put up the "No Standing" signs and who's paying for that. What is the purpose of preventing cars from stopping? While we were there the area's National Party MP (George Souris) announced that he will retire at the next election. May be best to contact NP leader Andrew Stoner.