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HEALTH RISKS FOR COMMUNITIES LIVING NEAR CSG ACTIVITIES

The National Toxics Network (NTN) and Lock the Gate (LTG) coalition are calling on federal and state governments to take urgent action to protect the health of all communities living around coal seam gas (CSG) fields after the release of the Queensland Government's report into the health of Tara residents.

"Despite the fact this was not a comprehensive health study it still found children living at Tara were exposed to numerous toxic volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in the air, some at levels above health criteria," said Drew Hutton, spokesperson from LTG.

The Queensland Government Health Report acknowledges that while it was '...Unable to determine whether any of the health effects reported by the community are linked to exposure to Coal Seam Gas activities, it does provide some evidence that might associate some of the residents' symptoms to exposures to airborne contaminants arising from CSG activities.'

"The CSG industry testing on which the Queensland Government's Health report is largely based is very limited and leaves many questions unanswered," said Dr Mariann Lloyd-Smith, NTN's CSG Advisor.

"There was no systematic approach to assessing the chemical pollutants. In most cases only one air sample was collected for each property, yet carcinogens like benzene and the neurotoxin toluene, were found in the air around Tara homes. We know from studies overseas that air monitoring needs to occur over months to ensure a true picture of air pollution from unconventional gas activities," said Dr Mariann Lloyd-Smith.

"The report repeats the unfounded statements that there were 'few exceedances for individual chemicals'. There was no attempt to assess those cases where exceedances did occur; they are simply dismissed. There was no consideration or assessment of cumulative or aggregate impacts even when some residences recorded a number of air contaminants and vulnerable children were being exposed, said Dr Lloyd-Smith.

"The report concludes that there was 'no evidence of contamination of concern', yet for many of the chemicals assessed the level of detection used by the laboratories was well above the level set for the protection of health." Dr Lloyd-Smith said.

“Of great concern was the detection of benzene at levels above health criteria. Benzene is a confirmed human carcinogen. Yet these results were dismissed in the report with the claim that ‘benzene was not a compound that is found in CSG and therefore cannot be attributed to CSG activities’” said Dr Lloyd-Smith.

Queensland’s Department of Environment and Heritage Protection website states that *“BTEX compounds (benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, xylene) are found naturally in crude oil, coal and gas deposits and therefore they can be naturally present at low concentrations in groundwater near these deposits”*.

“Of the 11 families and over 50 people reporting symptoms like headache, rashes, nausea and nosebleeds, only 15 people were seen in person and another two by telephone,” said Drew Hutton from LTG.

“The Report recognises the limitations of industry sampling for not even testing for toxic metals like arsenic, cadmium, chromium (III and VI), lead, and inorganic mercury; the metals that are of *‘more relevance to public health considerations of soil contamination’*.

“The Health Report and the documents on which it relies do not represent an acceptable investigation of the potential impacts of CSG activities on local residents and should not be used by either government or industry to claim a clean bill of health”.

“Instead the detection of such a wide range of VOCs in air should prompt an immediate independent, broad-spectrum, high-periodicity, long-term, monitoring program,” they concluded.

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References:

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REF: 0181432R01 (known as the ERM Report)