

**Submission to United Nations Human Rights Tribunal on Fracking**  
**The Human Health Sub-case: Psychological impacts of fracking**

**January 2018**

**Script for video presentation by**  
**Dr Wayne Somerville, Clinical Psychologist.**

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### **The Human Health Sub-case: Psychological Impacts of Fracking**

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My name is Dr Wayne Somerville. I have worked as a clinical psychologist in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales for over 30 years. As a trauma specialist, I have treated victims of war, violence, and crime, as well as providing therapy for adults suffering symptoms of psychopathology.

Over the past 10 years I have treated clients with symptoms related to unconventional gas field industrialisation in Queensland and New South Wales. As a gasfield free campaigner, outside the clinic I have had conversations with many concerned citizens.

My testimony on the mental health impacts of the unconventional gas industry is based on my clinical work with affected people, my reviews of the scientific literature, and my personal experiences as a rural landholder who was directly threatened by proposed gas fields.

I submit that the unconventional gas industry undermines the human right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Further, the industry operates in a manner that predictably exacerbates the risks, stresses and mental health problems associated with living near gas fields.

The pathogenic potential of this industry stems not only from its adverse impacts on the environment and on human health, but also from the perverse, negligent approach to risk management adopted by gas mining companies, regulators and political supporters of the industry.

Turning rural areas into gas fields creates social, psychological and environmental stresses that undermine health. The industry divides communities and sets neighbour against neighbour. People who profit from gas mining consider it a good thing. It's the people threatened by gas mining and who suffer losses or injuries who are at risk of developing symptoms.

When rural people confront the prospect of living with gas fields, the resulting sense of threat triggers the 'fight or flight' response. This is a natural coping mechanism which is designed to protect us in dangerous situations. Anxiety signals the presence of danger, and adrenaline and anger prepare us to fight off, or escape from, the threat.

If these responses lead to actions such as lobbying politicians and writing submissions that successfully remove the threat, then the stress can resolve.

But if all pleas and entreaties for help fall on deaf ears and the threat remains unabated, stress reactions become chronic and can result in severe symptoms including sleep disturbance, obsessive rumination, anxiety and depression.

The industry rapidly transforms the countryside into polluted, industrialized gas fields. Gas companies are legally empowered to enter people's properties, build roads, set up camps, drill wells, dig dams, and establish noisy, brightly lit well sites that run 24 hours a day for years.

The inability to control access to your property, the loss of the quiet enjoyment of your home, and the destruction of a treasured lifestyle, engenders a deep sense of loss. Grief and shock, complicated by disturbed sleep due to noise and light pollution from lighting, traffic, compressors and reverse osmosis plants, can lead to debilitating symptoms.

For affected country people, the loss of property value and the damage to their land feels like a personal injury. For farming families, their land is their life's work. Their home and farms are usually their major assets and their legacy for their children. The decline in land values, the lack of adequate compensation, and compromised livelihood from loss of productive land represents an unfair transfer of wealth from families to mining companies.

Respect for Government and the rule of law is undermined when principles of 'a fair go' and an economic 'level playing field' are abandoned to promote the interests of mining companies over those of individuals, small businesses and farming communities.

Country people often have a deep, even spiritual, connection to the land. When gas fields degrade their country, they can suffer shock and grief. Many see the industrial onslaught as a violation of 'Mother Earth' and grieve for the loss of 'Nature's gifts of beauty rich and rare'. Feelings of helplessness over their inability to protect their land and community can feed a profound sense of hopelessness and alienation.

For affected communities, intensive industrialisation, rapid changes in population due to large numbers of transient workers, and economic and social losses, result in social and psychological distress. This is reflected in statistics related to increased rates of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, sexually transmitted infections, and domestic violence; the inadequate supply of housing; rising costs of living; inadequate social services; and increased hospital admissions for physical and mental health problems.

But perhaps the most potent factor affecting the mental health of affected rural communities is the trauma of ill-health, especially that suffered by family members and children.

The pathogenic potential of gas field development is magnified by the industry's use of illegitimate 'risk management' practices, and its perverse interpretation of the principles of 'burden of proof' and 'duty of care'.

The unconventional gas industry and its political backers, routinely claim that, like a defendant in a criminal trial, the gas industry is entitled to the 'assumption of innocence'. For them, the industry should be assumed to be completely safe in all regards, unless the community, like a prosecutor in a criminal trial, can prove an adverse effect 'beyond a reasonable doubt'.

This is an illegitimate application of the burden of proof in the regulatory context where gas companies are seeking to profit from doing something that exposes the public to risk. If a pharmaceutical company wants to sell a new medication, it's not assumed a priori that the product is safe. Rather, as per the evidence-based approach, they have to demonstrate the safety and efficacy of their medication by comparing health data taken before and after people use the new drug.

Risk management is properly a process of thinking systematically about all possible risks before they occur, and setting up procedures to avoid problems or mitigate impacts. Legitimate cost/benefit analysis involves a reasoned consideration of all the potential costs

and benefits of a proposed development. ‘Duty holders’ are legally obliged to exercise due diligence and to consider all risks, not just those for which regulations exist, but even hazards which they do not know about.

Most citizens assume that managing the risks of operating unconventional gas fields would be about protecting people and the environment from harm. They expect cost/benefit analyses to consider costs as well as benefits, and they think that the duty of care rests with politicians and company executives.

But the gas industry and its supporters do not see things this way. The risk they seek to manage is not the harm that gas mining might cause people and the environment. Rather, their aim is to protect company profits and government revenue. The risk they fear is that people might find out what they’re up to and do something to impede their operations. Their duty of care extends only to themselves and their shareholders.

For this industry, an evidence-based demonstration of safety would once have been easy. All they had to do was collect baseline health and environmental data before drilling began, and compare this to data obtained after the gas fields were operating. And even if they failed to establish a baseline, they could have obtained data from any subsequent years to use for comparison and to correlate with the growth of the gas field.

But they never did this. Consequently, they have no evidence at all that their operations are safe. Instead, they rely on propaganda to promote the ridiculous argument that the industry poses no significant risk to citizens or the environment.

Rural people are shocked when their pleas to governments are ignored. The psychological impacts of the industry are magnified when citizens realise that regulatory authorities do not have their best interests at heart. And the harm is compounded as they discover that the government and industry use propaganda, denigrate scientists, and actively avoid or suppress proper assessment and monitoring of impacts, in order to protect powerful mining interests.

Unconventional gas mining in populated rural areas violates human rights. It is a threat to country people more dangerous than any drought, flood, bushfire or recession. The Darling Downs stands as proof that when this industry is allowed to permanently change the land and country life, the result is widespread emotional distress, social disruption and political turmoil.

The deliberate destruction of property, lifestyle and prospects for affected country people have left many depressed, some have suicided, others continue to struggle with anger and depression.

It’s hard to imagine how the current management of the unconventional gas industry in areas such as the Darling Downs could be made more damaging to the human rights and well-being of the people who live there.

I respectfully ask that the Tribunal do what it can to help the people of the Darling Downs and other communities affected by fracking and the unconventional gas industry.

Thank you.