

GISERA and conflict of interest

A fundamental conflict of interest underlies the Gas Industry Social and Environmental Alliance (GISERA), making it an inappropriate organisation to undertake research to evaluate the social and environmental impacts of unconventional gas development.

August 2018

Mark Ogge

What is GISERA?

The Gas Industry Social and Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA) is an [alliance agreement](#) between the five biggest unconventional gas companies in Australia (Australia Pacific LNG, Origin Energy, QGC, AGL and Santos) and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).¹

Conflict of interest

The five main Queensland gas companies provide over half of GISERA's funding. GISERA now also receives funding from federal and state governments. Government funding has made up 23 percent of GISERA's funding to date.²

¹ GISERA (January 4 2016) *Alliance Agreement*, https://gisera.csiro.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/National-GISERA-Agreement_web-version.pdf

² GISERA (2018) *GISERA Annual Research & Development Plan and Budget 2017/18*, <https://gisera.csiro.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Annual-Research-Development-Plan-and-Budget-2017-18.pdf>

Gas industry executives sit on all the committees overseeing GISERA research projects. The National Research Management Committee (NRMC) which oversees finance and research of all the regional committees has four gas industry executives amongst its eight members.³

The Regional Research Advisory Committees (RRAC) each have two gas industry executives out of their ten members.⁴

The gas companies that make up GISERA have billions of dollars at stake depending on whether unconventional gas development is allowed to go ahead.

Moratoriums bans, and conditions have been imposed in various states and territories on the basis of concerns about the social and environmental impacts.

Governments seek advice on the social and environmental impacts of unconventional gas development, for instance on the risk of water contamination, health impacts or greenhouse gas emissions. Whether gas development is eventually allowed to go ahead depends on the answers to these questions.

It is a clear conflict of interest for the research body that is asked to answer these questions to be funded by the industries that have billions of dollars at stake depending on the results of this research.

This conflict is compounded by the fact that executives of these companies sit on the research committees that decide which research questions are asked and oversee the research.

While GISERA argues that the majority of members on its research committees are “independent”, having other non-gas executive members on these committees does not remove the potential for influence.

There is [a policy](#) for “managing conflict of interest within GISERA”.⁵ However it does not adequately address the fundamental conflicts of interest at the heart of GISERA including that it is an alliance dominated by companies with an enormous vested

³ GISERA website, <https://gisera.csiro.au/research-independence/national-research-management-committee/>

⁴ GISERA (2018) *GISERA Annual Research & Development Plan and Budget 2017/18*, <https://gisera.csiro.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Annual-Research-Development-Plan-and-Budget-2017-18.pdf>

⁵ GISERA (2017), *Managing conflict of interest within GISERA Policy for GISERA partners and participants Updated 2017*, <https://gisera.csiro.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/National-GISERA-conflict-of-interest-Nov-2017.pdf>

interest in particular research outcomes who provide most of the funding and have executives on all the committees overseeing the research.

The policy requires project proponents to “identify” their “known conflicts of interest” and “to discuss any emerging potential conflicts of interest, or their likelihood, with the GISERA Director, who will advise as to the most appropriate responses” (in line with the policies within the document).⁶

Representation of GISERA in the media

For the reasons outlined above, it is inaccurate and misleading for the media to present GISERA research as independent.

The media should always clearly identify gas industry involvement in GISERA funding and research.

It is also misleading for GISERA research and researchers to be identified solely as CSIRO research and researchers. The public have a right to know if the research is from an organisation that CSIRO only plays a part in and includes five large gas companies.

Why GISERA is different from other CSIRO/ Industry partnerships?

The GISERA alliance is fundamentally different from the usual partnerships between industry and the CSIRO.

Usually these partnerships involve independent CSIRO research to help improve technology and productivity.

In contrast, the purpose of GISERA’s research program is to answer questions on the social and environmental impacts of gas development on which the social license of gas development depends. Policy makers will rely on this research to decide whether to allow unconventional gas development.

As such it is inappropriate for this research to be funded and overseen by the very companies with billions of dollars at stake on decisions that will be heavily influenced by this research.

But surely the gas industry should pay for this research?

If governments allow gas development, they have a responsibility to ensure it is safe. The community wouldn’t accept governments relying on the tobacco industry funded

⁶ GISERA (2017) Ibid

research into the health impacts of smoking, or asbestos industry research into the impacts of asbestos.

It would be a simple matter for the government to levy the gas industry for the cost of this kind of research and distribute it to universities and other research organisations that are not dependent on gas industry funding or allow gas industry executives to be involved in the research.

The Australia Institute report on the GISERA “Independence Pay” by Matt Grudnoff can be found [here](#).⁷

⁷ Grudnoff (2016) Independence Pay <http://www.tai.org.au/content/gisera-and-threat-independent-science>