

**TITLE: CSG industry wants to hide from its toxic name**

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Just as those in the world of Harry Potter refused to utter Lord Voldemort's name for fear of their lives, the gas industry appears equally frightened of using the words 'coal seam gas' for fear it might hurt its profits.

But just as calling Voldemort 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' didn't make him disappear, calling coal seam gas (CSG) something else doesn't make it any less of a concern for the community.

The gas industry has been hit by an increasing number of restrictions on its CSG projects at the same time that both sides of politics have been talking about reducing green tape for resource projects. Exclusion zones in NSW and new water triggers from the federal government show the level of unease that governments and the general public have about CSG.

According to the Liberal-National Party, the industry has failed to gain a social licence, with NSW Resources Minister Chris Hartcher chiding the industry at its national conference, saying, "Industry did not engage in the debate; industry stood back and allowed the debate to happen."

But how did the industry get to the point where the conservative side of politics is implementing two kilometre exclusion zones around homes?

Avoiding the issue seems to be the industry's plan, with new survey data from The Australia Institute showing that 36 per cent of Australians have not heard of coal seam gas. The industry tries not to mention CSG by name and in all kinds of ways it has avoided engaging with people's concerns.

It has refused to do any work to look at how much natural gas is leaking out of the ground because the industry is using the controversial method of extracting CSG known as fracking. This is a process that splits the rocks underground - where the natural gas is trapped - in order to force it out. With a complete lack of information from the industry, the government has been forced to commission the CSIRO to conduct research in this area.

The industry in its recent multi-million dollar advertising campaign has not made any attempt to allay the general public's concerns about the environmental effects of CSG extraction. In The Australia Institute survey, the top concerns people had about CSG were damage to the local environment, negative impacts on farming land, damage to people's health, and water contamination.

Instead, the advertising campaign focused on possible economic benefits of expanding the natural gas industry, including the amazing claim that it was responsible for 100,000 jobs last year. According to ABS, the industry employs about 20,000 people in total.

Apart from extraordinary claims of economic benefits, the most interesting thing about the advertising campaign is what it hasn't talked about. Nowhere does it mention CSG, despite the purpose of the campaign being to remove restrictions on CSG extraction. The advertising instead talks about natural gas, a term that is far less controversial.

The industry clearly understands how the general public views CSG because just after the federal election, it gleefully reported that it had conducted exit polls in a small number of electorates where it asked voters if natural gas was an issue for them. No one said it was. This fits in with the industry's desire to keep a low profile, but what is really interesting is that they asked about 'natural gas', not CSG. The response may well have been very different if they had used the words coal seam gas.

These words are so toxic that the NSW government has proposed changing them. Rather than referring to 'coal seam gas' or 'CSG', it would instead be called 'natural gas from coal seams'. Natural gas from coal seams might be technically correct, but we are left to wonder why the term needed expanding.

But the real question is why the industry is avoiding the debate. Could it be avoiding discussing environmental concerns because it fears that the public might be correct? Is its strategy not to engage a delaying tactic in the hope that CSG projects can be up and running before the full extent of the damage is known?

Whatever the reason, the restrictions on CSG do not look like going away anytime soon. Vote compass asked if people thought restrictions on CSG should be reduced and 60 per cent of respondents from New South Wales said no. With the industry afraid to even talk about CSG, it seems intent on exaggerating the economic benefits, running a baseless gas shortage scare campaign, and hoping that the 36 per cent of Australians who have not heard of CSG don't find out about it anytime soon.

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