

Media Release

11 April 2014

AGL overly optimistic about water quality

In response to last week's article in the Gloucester Advocate "Water quality not impacted by trial" relating to the irrigation of the Tiedmans property, Groundswell Gloucester is still far from convinced that there is any reason at all for AGL to have any optimism about the outcome of the program.

Water resources engineer Jeff Kite said that "Groundswell Gloucester has consulted an expert soil scientist to look at both AGL's December reports and to undertake a review of the overall usefulness of the 'trial'".

He said "the consultant confirmed the view that the irrigation of saline water on cropping land at the Tiedmans property is not a 'trial' because the program design is fatally flawed."

As mentioned in the Advocate article, the high risk associated with the project was first identified by the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) in a letter which the agency sent to the Minerals and Energy Unit of Department Trade Investment Regional Infrastructure and Services (DTIRIS).

Mr Kite said "Groundswell Gloucester believes this letter was first sent to DTIRIS as early as April 2012. It seems that somebody in Government chose to bury the letter but it apparently resurfaced in late 2013.

"The EPA's letter raises a lot of the issues that the soil scientist raised in Groundswell Gloucester's document "Exposing the Risks" (December 2013) although he had no knowledge of the letter that was sent to DTIRIS about 20 months earlier."

A key paragraph in the EPA letter states: "While salt concentrations can be managed through dilution, without treatment the total load will remain the same. The salt load applied during irrigation will either accumulate in the soil profile, be leached to groundwater and/or runoff to surface water. There will be therefore a cumulative effect of the salt loads on the irrigation area and/or other water users and environmental values. Consequently, unless there is some treatment, it is unlikely that the long term irrigation of this water will be a sustainable proposition."

Mr Kite said "there were some minor changes to the program design before AGL implemented their program in April 2013 but fundamentally it is the same project. In Groundswell Gloucester's "Exposing the Risks" document the soil scientist concluded that '...this is not a trial in the sense that meaningful data will be obtained...It is simply a process for disposing of the produced water ... and the environmental safety of this process is flawed and cannot be tested.'"

With respect to the recent reports, the soil scientist concluded that AGL's results are indicating that soil salinity has increased over the last 6 months in the top 60cm of soil. This increase is to be expected because adding salt to the type of soil at the Tiedmans site will result in salt accumulating over time in the soil.

It does not matter what the salt concentration in the water is because it does not get leached out; it just accumulates with each irrigation. This is why the salinity in the soil at Tiedmans has increased since the last report in July 2013. The last few months in 2013 were dry and much more water was irrigated and therefore more salt has been added to the soil.

Mr Kite noted that "similar 'trials' have been undertaken before in Australia and other countries and we understand the outcomes have been the same."

To claim that the soil has "showed significant improvement" is also highly questionable. It would seem that the only real improvement relates to the large quantities of soil amendment that have been added to the site at great expense to AGL.

According to Groundswell Gloucester there is also a significant reason for caution related to feeding fodder, such as triticale, to cattle when the fodder has been irrigated with blended produced water. AGL's own data shows there are small quantities of heavy metals and other contaminants in produced water. According to the soil scientist some of these contaminants in irrigation water can be taken up by triticale and remain in the fodder.

Groundswell Gloucester has been advised that a full chemical analysis of triticale should have been completed before any of AGL's fodder was fed to livestock. Although levels of heavy metal in the soil are likely to be small at this early stage, concentrations will build up over time as more contaminated water is applied through irrigation. Such a chemical analysis was requested from AGL many months ago but it has not been forthcoming.

Ends

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