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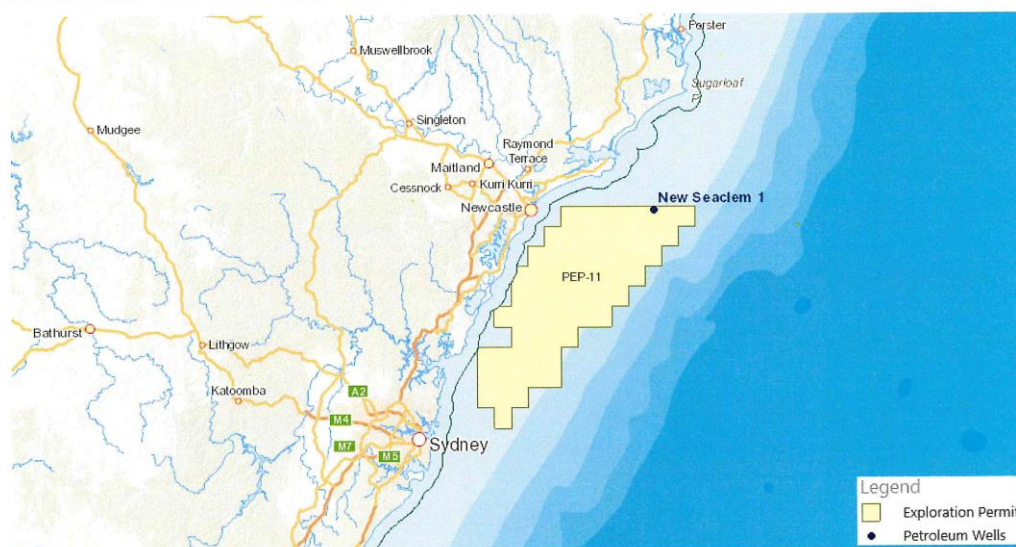
Submission: Impact of seismic testing on fisheries and the marine environment

The Hunter Community Environment Centre (HCEC) is a not-for-profit advocacy organisation established in 2004 to promote ecological awareness in the Newcastle and Hunter regions. The HCEC has worked to campaign with local communities on a range of issues, including the establishment of marine parks and wetlands, air and water quality and biodiversity loss.

Since early 2018, representatives of our organisation have been involved with the community-led campaign in opposition to seismic testing and the prospect of offshore extraction, in an area of Commonwealth waters extending from Newcastle, through Port Stephens to Northern Sydney, where the active Petroleum Exploration Permit 11 (PEP11) is owned by Asset Energy (85%), the fully owned subsidiary of Advent, and Bounty Oil and Gas (15%).

The HCEC along with the Protect Our Coast Alliance (POCA) and various other locally-based groups, have responded to a strong concern from Novocastrians, Lake Macquarie, Central Coast and Sydney residents regarding the impacts of seismic testing on marine life, and the flow-on impacts to existing industries in the region, which rely on stable and healthy marine ecosystems including fisheries and tourism operations near or in the Petroleum Exploration Permit Zone 11.

Offshore NSW – Petroleum Exploration Permits



Extracted from the National Offshore Petroleum Information Management System (NOPIMS). For more information, visit <http://www.ga.gov.au/nopims>.
 Accurate as at 5 February 2019.

Permit	Operator	Granted	Expiring	Area (km ²)	Type	Comments
PEP-11	Asset Energy	24/06/1999	12/02/2021	4,547	Exploration Permit	Awarded as part of the 1997 Acreage Release

Figure 1. NOPIMS PEP11 map

We estimate that over 15, 000 people from the Newcastle region have attended public displays of support for a ban on seismic testing in the “PEP11 zone”, and wish to use this opportunity to convey to the Senate Committee that there is no social licence or public support for seismic testing or an offshore extraction industry in the region.



Figure 2. Newcastle residents gathered outside the NOPSEMA community drop-in session at Town Hall, February 2019

Seismic testing off the coastline of NSW in the Sydney Basin brings a range of risks to marine ecosystems and local economies, and the attendant potential of an offshore extraction industry with its own set of environmental risks form the basis of the high degree of opposition.

The HCEC and POCA conducted door-knocking in the Newcastle region to gauge public opinion on seismic testing within PEP11, with 87% of respondents expressing opposition and none expressing strong support.¹

The Inquiry’s Terms of Reference are addressed below, including the public and community perspectives on seismic testing and its impacts:

a. the body of science and research into the use of seismic testing

There is a growing body of scientific research striving to understand the impact of seismic testing on marine organisms and ecosystems, with most confirming there are adverse impacts.

Impairment to the navigation, settlement and procreation of marine species from zooplankton to fish and squid², right up to large marine mammals, including whales and dolphins³ have been observed and documented.

There have been anecdotal observations of these impacts in the Newcastle region, with a local fisherman citing a decline in viable catch directly after seismic testing has occurred in within the PEP11 zone.⁴

¹ [HCEC Seismic Testing Community Survey Report](#)

² [Acoustic Properties of Marine Underwater Sound](#)

³ [Seismic Seas: Understanding the impact of offshore seismic petroleum exploration surveys on marine species](#)

⁴ <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/state/nsw/2018/04/02/seismic-testing-newcastle/>

We acknowledge that existing and currently active studies, such as those being carried out by the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) do inform regulation and approvals agreed to by the *National Offshore Petroleum Safety Environment Management Authority (NOPSEMA)*.

However, considering that adverse impacts have been well documented and further studies are in the process with findings yet to be determined, we are calling for a moratorium on all seismic testing activity until such a time that evidence quantifying the full impacts can inform the regulation and the permit conditions can be based on mitigation measures that are appropriate to the degree of impact.

Furthermore, no research or consultation with fishing, tourism or community stakeholders has been carried out in relation to PEP11, meaning no first-hand scientific studies regarding impacts has been accessible to stakeholders.

b. the regulation of seismic testing in both Commonwealth and state waters;

The Department of Innovation, Industry and Science regulates permits, leases and licences (titles) for seismic activity in Commonwealth waters, with a Joint Authority comprised of a relevant Federal and State Ministers, in concert with the regulator (NOPSEMA) being responsible for administering permits.

The original approval for PEP11 was granted in 1997, with seismic testing activities being carried out at various points over the intervening decades in-keeping with the stipulations of the permit.

Subsequent renewals or extension of PEP11 have been met with consistent opposition from every level but the Federal, as in 2017 when The Hon. Matt Canavan, Federal Minister for Resources successfully sought to grant approval for the extension while The Hon. Don Harwin, NSW Minister for Resources, Minister for Energy and Utilities officially rejected it.⁵

Harwin's predecessor, The Hon. Anthony Roberts also rejected a extension proposal, with both State Ministers citing inconsistencies between regulation of onshore and offshore petroleum.⁶

Local councils including the Newcastle⁷ and Central Coast⁸ have moved motions in opposition to offshore testing and extraction activity in PEP11, and Lake Macquarie's Mayor has expressed public opposition to the permit.⁹

In March 2018, The Hon. Matt Canavan announced that "... All environment plans for offshore oil and gas activities will be published, and draft environment plans for offshore seismic and exploratory drilling activities will be open for public comment, under recent changes to environmental regulations."¹⁰

While this change was welcomed by the community, it's not a whole solution to "improve consultation and increase transparency of offshore oil and gas activities"¹¹, and the HCEC recommends the following changes to the achieve this:

- Introduction of a requirement for both members of the Joint Authority to visit and meet with local government and community stakeholders in areas affected by offshore permits prior to decisions regarding permit renewals, extensions or any new applications

⁵ <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Hansard/Pages/HansardResult.aspx#/docid/HANSARD-1820781676-75435>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ In 2008 and 2019, Newcastle City Council passed such motions, <https://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/getattachment/ea7cc3c4-3317-4b60-87f4-79e115ee3b10/Ordinary-Council-Meeting-Agenda.aspx>

⁸ <http://www.centralcoastnews.net/2019/02/21/opposition-to-seismic-blasting-strengthens/>

⁹ <https://www.lakesmail.com.au/story/5437597/lake-macquarie-mayor-weighs-in-on-gas-exploration-off-hunter-coast/>

¹⁰ <https://www.minister.industry.gov.au/ministers/canavan/media-releases/increasing-transparency-oil-and-gas-environment-plans>

¹¹ Ibid

- The State Minister in the Joint Authority have equal powers (right to veto) to the Federal Minister when approving or rejecting permits or extensions

c. the approach taken to seismic testing internationally;

Over the last decade, a raft of countries including New Zealand, France, Belize, Denmark, Ireland and Costa Rica¹² have made moves to ban or phase out offshore exploration, mostly citing climate change impacts and the global transition away from fossil-fuels.

While Australia is lagging on the climate action front due to our economic dependence on coal-mining and exports, there is a huge demand for the swift adoption of renewable energy and waning support for carbon-intensive, extractive industries for use domestically or for export.

Therefore, a comparable ban on seismic testing in Australia's Commonwealth or State waters would be welcomed by swathes of the communities along PEP11, the Great Australian Bight, and the broader population eager for Australia to de-carbonise its economy and generate sustainable employment and products.

d. any other related matters

Marine ecosystems are already under immense strain from increasing acidification and temperature rises, with seismic testing adding additional strain on populations facing insurmountable and threats to their survival in the coming decades.

The testing for petroleum deposits in preparation for an offshore extraction industry off the NSW coastline is unacceptable and irresponsible in this context of intensifying climate change.

To account for sensitive marine populations, additional caution and rigour should be applied to any seismic testing activities that must proceed and seismic testing for the purpose offshore petroleum should be banned in Australia, as it has been in many other countries.

¹² <https://www.offshore-technology.com/features/countries-ending-oil-exploration/>