

Received 17 February 2024

I refer to your email to the Minister for Climate Change, Energy and Environment, the Hon Penny Sharpe MLC, the Minister for Agriculture, Regional New South Wales and Western New South Wales, the Hon Tara Moriarty MLC, and the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, the Hon Paul Scully MP regarding the impact of the Santos gas project in the Pilliga area. Your email was referred to the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA), and I have been asked to reply.

Thank you for raising your concerns regarding fire damage to the Santos gas infrastructure located within the Pilliga Forest. The ongoing protection of the Pilliga Forest and fire risk are key considerations in our regulation of the Santos site.

I can assure you the EPA is committed to delivering against its lead regulator role and enforcing the NSW Government's commitment to delivering best practice regulation of the gas industry.

The EPA has conducted onsite inspections and can confirm no damage to gas infrastructure occurred as a result of the Pilliga Forest fires and that the Santos Fire Management Plan was enacted and is still in force. All power lines, water and gas pipelines, and communications lines in the Bibblewindi to Leewood corridor are underground and were not exposed to the bushfire.

Following the fire and with access approval from the Forestry Corporation of NSW (FCNSW), Santos conducted integrity testing and verification of the wells before recommencing any operations. All 26 pre-fire producing gas wells have returned to normal operation following the Santos integrity checks and verification.

The EPA is an independent regulatory government body and the lead regulator for all gas activities in NSW.

EPA Authorised Officers in Narrabri hold Infrared Thermography Practitioner Certifications and are trained in Leak Detection and Repair (LDAR). The EPA was granted restricted access by FCNSW to enter Pilliga Forest on Tuesday, 30 January 2024, to assess the infrastructure and conduct post-fire LDAR inspections on all 26 operational gas wells within Pilliga Forest.

Santos is required under their licence to commission a suitably qualified, independent contractor annually to conduct an LDAR program across the Pilliga gas fields. Santos has advised the EPA that an independent LDAR program has been brought forward to early March 2024 as soon as FCNSW reopens Pilliga Forest.

The NSW Government is aware of the community's concerns about the gas industry and has implemented the strictest regulatory controls for gas activities in Australia.

The State Significant Development (SSD) states that Santos is required to complete, to the satisfaction of the Planning Secretary, a Fire Safety Study in consultation with Fire NSW, a Fire Hazard Analysis, a Construction Safety Study and a Pipeline Safety Management Study before the commencement of Phase two of the development. The EPA has been advised that an independent body will conduct these studies. It also states that an independent environmental audit is to be completed within one year of the project's commencement. This report is currently in its final stages and will be published and publicly available.

If you have any further questions about this matter, you can contact Scott Kidd, Director Operations, at Info@epa.nsw.gov.au

Sincerely
Jason R. Gordon
Executive Director Operations
Environment Protection Authority