

Coalition's coal seam gas buffer zone rejected

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The NSW government appears to have rejected the "humble advice" of its federal Coalition counterparts to impose a two-kilometre buffer zone between houses and coal seam gas wells.

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With AGL postponing its plans for 66 gas wells near and under housing estates in western Sydney, the Coalition's energy and resources spokesman, Ian Macfarlane, called on NSW to adopt Queensland's policy of a two-kilometre buffer for coal seam gas wells around towns of more than 1000 people. "I think the industry needs to step out of the more densely populated areas," he said. "I can only give NSW my humble advice, but I think the buffer zone is the only way to restore public confidence in the industry."

Russell Matheson, the Liberal member for the federal seat of Macarthur, where AGL has proposed its Camden expansion project, said: "They should not extract gas from under people's homes or close to people's homes. The buffer zone should mean the Camden expansion won't happen. People in my electorate need that kind of certainty."

Asked whether NSW would consider a buffer, the Resources and Energy Minister, Chris Hartcher, said the state had stringent controls protecting urban areas and the toughest regulations in the country. He said AGL's existing operation in Camden "has been operating without incident for the past 10 years".

Coal seam gas has become an election issue. The federal Environment Minister, Tony Burke, has demanded NSW impose stricter regulations on the industry and threatened to increase federal powers to intervene in state planning processes if it does not.

The federal Liberals are concerned Mr Burke wants to play politics with coal seam gas before the election, particularly given Labor's problems in western Sydney. Last week, AGL suspended its application for new licences for the Camden expansion project, pending more studies and consultation. Mr Burke gave conditional approval to an AGL project for 110 wells near Gloucester, in the independent Rob Oakeshott's electorate, Lyne.

Mr Oakeshott said the federal Liberal's buffer zone policy should mean they ruled out the Gloucester project as well.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/political-news/coalitions-coal-seam-gas-buffer-zone-rejected-20130215-2eiff.html>