SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Community wellbeing and attitudes to energy transition in the North Perth Basin: Dongara

This joint CSIRO/Curtin University project aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how energy infrastructure projects in the North Perth Basin region would affect the functioning and well-being of local communities.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The Mid West region of Western Australia (WA) is currently host to several exploration licences for natural gas and geothermal resources along with prospective wind and large-scale solar developments. In this context of increasing energy developments in the region, this research provides a baseline understanding of community wellbeing and perceptions of energy developments, particularly gas, in the communities of the North Perth Basin located in the Mid West region of WA.

METHODS

The Curtin Institute for Energy Transition led this this research from November 2024 to July 2025, with Federal Government funding provided through CSIRO's Gas Industry Social and Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA). Using a mixed methods approach, the entire research comprised an online survey of 225 residents in Geraldton, Dongara, Mingenew, Three Springs and Eneabba, followed by twelve focus groups and fifteen online interviews. Survey respondents in Dongara represented 21 percent of responses to the survey. Two focus groups were also conducted in Dongara.

FINDINGS

Community wellbeing

Dongara residents had strong levels of attachment to the area, high levels of community trust and personal safety.

KEY POINTS

- People had strong attachment to the local area, high levels of community spirit, community trust and personal safety in Dongara.
- Dongara had the lowest levels of trust in local government, compared to other towns in the study and low levels of trust in state government.
- Residents expressed concern about groundwater extraction from industry and concerns about sand mining and biodiversity in the region.
- Residents felt they had little opportunities to participate in decisions about gas development in the region and indicated their preference for more information from the gas industry.
- Limited availability of both housing and holiday accommodation was noted, with holiday accommodation often booked out from industry.
- Concerns were raised about the sufficiency of aged care facilities in the region, with an ageing demographic.

IMAGE: Dongara from the Sandy's Ladder lookout (Adobe Stock)

IMAGE 2: Mouth of the Irwin River in Dongara (Adobe Stock)

Residents in Dongara were an older demographic and concerns about aged care facilities being insufficient for the growing ageing population were discussed.

Economic dimensions

The gas industry provides sponsorship and funds for local community projects, but participants felt that industry provided tokenistic support.

They wanted financial contributions from industry to be more strategic to address community needs. There was also concern about wealth inequality in the region.

Physical infrastructure

With the number of heavy vehicles on the roads in the Dongara region, residents expressed concern about road safety, and ongoing maintenance costs for roads. Participants also expressed interest in community batteries to potentially address electricity reliability issues in the region.

"And when you sit in the [council] meetings, the way they respond is they're continually having to spend money on all the roads that are around. All of those things because they have big trucks and the roads fall apart very quickly, but then everybody else is complaining [be]cause nothing is done anywhere else."

Environmental concerns

Environmental concerns from Dongara residents included industry impacts of sand mining and increasing salinity in groundwater.

Participants also expressed concern about biodiversity in the region, noting that Dongara is located in the Southwest Australian Floristic Region, a global hotspot for plant diversity and endemic species.

Health concerns

Dongara residents had a relatively high level of concern about the pressure on health services in the region.

Political dimensions

Residents of Dongara felt they had limited influence on industry development in the region and wanted additional information about projects in the area. They sought information about what project proponents plan to do, when and how they will do it. There were also concerns about the level of influence of industry on the local government.

When asked about agreement to the statement of ***how gas companies may involve the community about decisions on conventional gas development,*** Dongara residents felt that the gas industry did not provide opportunities for community participation and would not change practices in response to community sentiment.

Authors: Dr Maureen Boyle, Associate Professor Raquel Tardin-Coelho, Dr Lydia Maketo, Dr Emma D'Antoine, Dr Hannah Velure Uren, Associate Professor Andrew Knight, Professor Peta Ashworth

Produced by Elena Perse for the Curtin Institute for Energy Transition (2025)

This research has been funded through CSIRO's Gas Industry Social and Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA) with contributions from the Australian Government's Department of Industry, Science and Resources. GISERA is a collaboration between CSIRO, Commonwealth, state and territory governments and industry established to undertake research on the impacts of onshore gas exploration and development on the environment, and the socio-economic costs and benefits. For information about GISERA's governance structure, projects and research findings visit https://gisera.csiro.au

CRICOS Provider Code 00301J