

Last week, the Western Australian Government [lifted its state-wide moratorium](#) on hydraulic fracturing (fracking). Unconventional gas industries were given the green light to develop on existing petroleum leases, especially in WA's vast Kimberley region.

Following the Northern Territory government's [April decision](#) to lift its temporary fracking ban, this decision paves the way for future growth of the industry across much of northern Australia.

Read more: [***Australian gas: between a fracked rock and a socially hard place***](#)

Fracking policies vary widely across Australia's states and territories, and so do community attitudes. Our [review of the literature](#) on unconventional gas development in Australia reveals an inconsistent approach in how governments have responded to the industry. While coal seam gas extraction has proceeded almost unimpeded in Queensland, the industry was halted in its tracks in Victoria, with a permanent ban on fracking legislated in March this year.

In the NT, despite an [inquiry](#) that acknowledged clear and widespread public opposition to fracking, the territory's moratorium was lifted. In Tasmania, a [moratorium is in place until 2025](#).

Unconventional gas development in New South Wales – despite [pressing energy needs](#) – has been protracted owing to growing community opposition towards fracking, with exclusion zones created near residential areas and industries such as wine-making and horse breeding.

The WA government's decision to leave in place localised bans in the state's most populated areas, while allowing fracking in existing petroleum tenements elsewhere, echoes the position taken by the [South Australian government](#) in September. The latter's policy imposes a ten-year fracking ban in SA's agriculturally rich southeast, while allowing the practice to continue in the

northeast.

Balancing policy?

Labelled as a “clean” alternative to coal by industry, unconventional gas is presented as a key “transition” fuel, capable of delivering reliable, lower-emission electricity – a stepping stone along the path to zero-carbon energy. Our [research](#) suggests that this clean image is pivotal to public support for the industry.

The unconventional gas industry has been hailed as an [economic lifeline](#) for regional Australia. Justification for its growth into new regions is tied closely to the purported domestic “

[gas crisis](#)

”. Others predict that fracking for unconventional gas could have

[negative economic consequences](#)

Many affected communities continue to question the capacity of the industry to operate with low risk to [health](#) and the [environment](#). In the Kimberley and across Australia, opposition to fracking simmers.

WA and SA exemplify efforts to strike a balance between the unconventional gas industry and concerned community members. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the effectiveness of attempts to secure fracking bans could relate to the political and economic muscle of affected communities. Our ongoing research seeks to analyse this development pattern.

Read more: [***Fracking can cause social stress in nearby areas: new research***](#)

What are the real emissions?

The [industry](#) has argued that “fugitive emissions” of methane from Australian unconventional gas wells are relatively low. However, more [recent studies](#) warn that we may be

underestimating the true climate risks of unconventional gas.

Indeed, Australia's spike in greenhouse gas emissions is attributed to the expansion of unconventional gas production and exports. They underpinned a 13.7% increase in national [fu](#)
[gitive greenhouse gas emissions](#)
, contributing to Australia recording its 15th consecutive quarter of greenhouse gas emission increases this year. These figures call into question Australia's trajectory to meeting its obligations under the Paris Agreement.

The impacts of rising greenhouse emissions are becoming increasingly visible and costly, in the form of more frequent violent storms, intense rainfall, drought and bushfires. Last week, the Victorian Labor Government was re-elected on the back of strong [climate policy](#). With 15,000 children walking out of school on Friday, the youth
[“climate strike” rallies](#)
attest to the strength of community feelings on climate action and the role of fracking in this context.

Future of fracking?

For state and territory leaders, the job of balancing gas industry interests with those of increasingly vocal communities is becoming more of a juggling act than ever before. With climate concerns intensifying, renewable energy supported by [battery power](#) appears a promising option for meeting regional development and energy needs. This has potential to gain widespread public support and create "green-collar" jobs while helping to reduce Australia's emissions.

In contrast, a reliance on unconventional gas as an interim energy solution may "frack" more than just deep rock formations - but potentially communities, ecosystems, politics ... and not least the climate.

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Fracking policies are wildly inconsistent across Australia, from gung-ho development to total bans

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