

Inquiry gives all clear to fracking

■ Daniel Mercer and Glenn Cordingley

Australia's peak oil and gas lobby has called for an "end to the scare campaigns" against the gas extraction technique, hydraulic fracturing, after a parliamentary inquiry gave it the all clear.

The Upper House Environment and Public Affairs Committee's report tabled last week found "negligible" risks to human health or the environment.

But the cross-party committee

called for changes to regulation, including stiffer fines for companies doing the wrong thing and banning the use of certain chemicals.

The committee recommended an independent body to arbitrate disputes and provide more transparency. Conservation Council WA director Piers Verstegen said the report perpetuated a number of myths that shale gas fracking could be done safely.

"The report continues a trend where governments and gas indus-

try simply paper over the serious risks that gas fracking presents for our groundwater, our communities, our climate and our tourism and agriculture jobs," he said.

Mines and Petroleum Minister Bill Marmion welcomed the report, saying it focuses on an industry that could be "very important" for WA's energy future, and local jobs.

"It is interesting to note that the committee found that claims of a proliferation of gas wells in the Kimberley and the Mid-West have

been overstated and are not based on evidence," he said.

"I also note the finding that there are sufficient safeguards to protect public drinking water source areas and that seismic activity risks from hydraulic fracturing are negligible in WA."

Mr Marmion said the State Government would carefully analyse the 51 findings and 12 recommendations and respond in due course.

The committee said the risk of fracking "inducing" increased seismic activity in WA was almost

non-existent, while the threat of wells intersecting with underground aquifers used for drinking water supplies was also slim.

As a result, it rebuffed a suggestion from the Water Corporation to impose a 1.5km buffer around drinking water sources to separate them from fracking activities.

However, the committee made recommendations aimed at overcoming shortcomings in the way the industry was regulated, as well as its image in the eyes of the wider community.