

CBM checks, balances in place

Part two of a two part series

Companies drilling for coal bed methane and the Energy and Utilities Board stand up for industry activity

SHAWNE MOHL
For the Innisfail Province

According to government officials and industry professionals the production of coal bed methane (CBM) in Alberta will never impact or harm the environment, the ground water supply, or one's health.

Coal bed methane, typically referred to as CBM is natural gas - typically methane - found within coal seams under the ground.

CBM used to be referred to as the 'trash gas'. It is the gas which used to kill the canary in underground mines.

The production of CBM in Alberta is being questioned by a number of Albertans.

A group of landowners and environmentalists have been touring around the province passing out the message that "CBM production is ruining land, water, and people's health."

One of those against development is Jessica Ernst, a woman who owns 50 acres of land just outside of the hamlet of Rosebud, near Drumheller.



INNISFAIL PROVINCE PHOTO by Shawne Mohl

Doreen Rempel (left) of MGV Energy is shown here speaking with the company chief operating officer about various business issues, including CBM production wells throughout Central Alberta.

At a recent meeting in Trochu, she talked about being able to light her tap water on fire because there is so much methane in it.

She blames the phenomenon on the drilling of CBM wells and fracturing.

"It's really hard to believe that you are being poisoned by your own

water," she said. "I believe we are up against a huge war for water. Water is needed for life. The water is just one impact of CBM (well production)."

During the Trochu meeting, two American women painted a scary picture of contaminated ground water supply and sterilized land.

The things which the speakers say have occurred in the United States could never and will never happen here, says Bob Curran, spokesperson for the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (EUB) spokesperson.

"I don't know what the guidelines are like in Colorado or any of these

other places (in the United States). But what I can tell you is this: the things they are alleging have happened in the U.S. could not happen in Alberta without severe repercussions to any company that dared to perpetrate those types of things. It just wouldn't happen here. Companies know that if

they break the rules they will suffer consequences," Curran said.

One company who knows the guidelines and rules they must follow very well is MGV Energy, whose main business is drilling CBM wells throughout Central Alberta.

Doreen Rempel of MGV Energy, who was present at the recent CBM meeting held in Trochu, said that her company works very closely with the government and land owners to ensure that everything is being done to protect everyone's interests.

"The impacts of CBM are very minimal," Rempel said.

She said the guidelines and regulations MGV Energy has to comply with wouldn't make it possible for an oil company in Alberta to ruin the water supply, environment, or pose any types of health risks to nearby land owners.

In the production of CBM there is, at times, saline water brought to the surface in the production of the natural gas.

Saline (salt) water will sterilize land and nothing will grow if it ever comes in contact with the surface.

The speakers from the U.S. said saline water from CBM wells have been spread across fields and ruined good pasture grounds for cattle.



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Most of the coal seams where the natural gas is deposited throughout the Horseshow Canyon basin, according to Rempel, have been naturally de-watered.

So when the gas is brought to the surface there is no saline they have to deal with.

However, in the cases where saline is brought to the surface it is injected back into the ground using injector wells.

The water, according to Rempel, never touches the ground and in no way under the strict regulations that they have to follow could it.

Rempel also pointed out that in Alberta, oil companies are not allowed to use evaporation ponds to dispose of saline waters, they all have to be injected back into the subsurface.

There is no way that a CBM well could affect one's ground water, MGV Energy company officials say.

According to Rempel, the company has a cement lining between the well and the subsurface so no containments could ever get out of the well.

"That is a government regulated process," she explained. "It isn't anything new. That has been happening Alberta for decades."

During the drilling process and even after the well is active, there are many guidelines that need to be followed.

Aside from the government regulations MGV Energy says that it consults with rural landowners and tries to get any concerns addressed prior to drilling beginning.

"We like to talk about win-win situations," Rempel said. "We are always willing to talk to land owners, and try to get their questions answered."

One of the complaints which a landown-

er near Rosebud had was about the noise of compressors involved with CBM production.

According to Rempel, even though it's not required, MGV Energy stations all its compressors together for numerous wells in one central location.

They try to locate the compressor stations as far away from residential homes as possible.

Rempel says that CBM is a reliable, long-term source of natural gas that is used in homes, offices, and businesses each day.

And this is the reason why companies like MGV Energy see the benefit of drilling these wells, said Rempel.

"People realize that (CBM production) is a reliable source (and) we require higher densities, and this is a good solution," she said.

"We have to co-exist. We have a fundamental right to the access of our mineral rights and landowners have the right to enjoy and use their land. We have to learn how to co-exist."

Curran said the EUB has done extensive research into a number of complaints.

It has been determined that CBM production, to date in Alberta, has not been the reason why some water wells have appeared to lose pressure or the quality has

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decreased, he said.

"There is no evidence to support (affecting water wells)," he said. "We are a very vigilant and strict regulator. Any suggestion that somehow these companies can come in and do things that would allow them to comprise the quality of ground water, under our rules is simply untrue."

Curran says in the Rosebud area where concerned resident Jessica Ernst lives, there has been methane found in the water wells in that area for decades, long before CBM production came into the picture.

"In the Rosebud area because a lot of water wells in completed in coal seams they have had methane in water wells for decades. It's a common problem and actually just about anywhere in Alberta because you could drill down just about anywhere in Alberta and hit a coal seam because we have that much coal in this province."

The EUB is a very strict regulator, Curran says.

And even though there are no specific regulations that relate to CBM production, there are ample rules which will ensure no oil and gas production of any kind will affect the environment, he said.

"One of the things you are hearing is somehow there are no regulations. It's sort

of a half truth, because they are saying there is nothing specific to CBM development," he said.

That is true, he said.

However, what they are not saying is that there are regulations in place that relate to shallow gas drilling that also pertain to CBM wells, he said.

All these regulations are designed to protect ground water, protect aquifers, he said.

"We have the fracturing directive out. We don't have specific CBM, but we have regulations that pertain to drilling wells in a variety of categories, under which CBM would fall, specifically shallow gas drilling," he said. "All the rules that are in place for shallow gas drilling in Alberta, which we have a tremendous amount, all hold true for CBM drilling as well."



file photo

Gov't plans to conduct baseline well water testing

BY LEA SMALDON
Innisfail Province

The provincial government expects to have a database of baseline water quality data for central Alberta by 2008 that can be used prior to coalbed methane drilling.

Alberta Environment announced this month that it is undertaking two new initiatives as part of its ongoing strategy to ensure Albertans continue to have access to clean, safe drinking water.

The first is development of standard procedures and reporting requirements for baseline testing of well water to establish water quality prior to coalbed methane drilling.

The second is a two-year program to

map groundwater resources in central Alberta.

"It's vital that industrial development in Alberta proceeds in a way that protects the quality of our most precious resource, our water," said Guy Boutillier, Minister of Environment. "My ministry will continue to work closely with other departments and stakeholders to ensure the environment is strongly and unequivocally protected while continuing to support Alberta's vibrant economy."

Baseline testing will ensure well water quality is accurately measured and reported before drilling for coalbed methane takes place, according to the department.

The need for baseline testing was identi-

fied in earlier work with stakeholders.

The testing, along with the groundwater mapping initiative, supports the government's Water For Life strategy by improving knowledge of the province's water resources.

Alberta Environment's two-year program to map groundwater will focus on

central Alberta, specifically in the Ardley coal zone, where fresh groundwater may be pumped to facilitate coalbed methane development.

This initial mapping is expected to be complete in 2008.

Congratulations

Courtney Lentz of Spruce View, AB graduated from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Training Academy in Regina, Saskatchewan on February 20th, 2006.

Constable Lentz was posted to the Hobbema RCMP Detachment in Alberta.

Constable Lentz wishes to thank her friends, the community of Spruce View, members of Innisfail RCMP and especially her family for all the encouragement, support and prayers received during the period of time she was trying to achieve her dream and especially during her training in Regina.

*Don't ever give up your dreams
And never leave them behind,
Find them; make them yours
And all through your life cherish them
And never let them go*

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Nomination forms are available at
Town Office 4943-53 Street and **Neighborhood Place** 5713-51 Ave
 Deadline for nominations is **March 24, 2006**
 Annual Awards Banquet is **Tuesday, April 25**
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