

EDMONTON JOURNAL



**Bruins shark-bitten
by Thornton trade**
DAN BARNES / D1



**For diapers with attitude,
papa's got a brand new bag**
LOOK / E1



**Alberta's film industry
has its 'best year yet'**
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**Inside the surprise deal
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EDMONTON'S NEWSPAPER SINCE 1903

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 200

Tainted water lights fire under gas fears



NEAR DISASTER FOR CITY

Tainted water lights fire under gas fears



The methane concentration in Jessica Ernst's well water is so high that, as seen in the photo at top right, she can light a flame by holding a lighter to the lip of a bottle of tap water.

CHRIS SCHWARZ, THE JOURNAL

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HANNEKE BROOYMANS
Journal Staff Writer

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boost flooding conventional natural gas

COAL BED
METHANE
IN ALBERTA

NEAR DISASTER FOR CITY TROOPS

NEW VEHICLE CREDITED WITH
SAVING 3 IN AFGHAN BLAST / **AS**

Voter goodies a family affair

NDP unveils day-care plan; Tories tout sports a



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Southern Alberta woman suspects her polluted well may be linked to growing coal bed methane industry

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Journal Staff Writer
ROSEBUD

Jessica Ernst became concerned about her well water when her taps started to whistle loudly.

Then her water turned a cloudy white, and began to fizz and smoke whenever she poured a glass.

Now she horrifies her neighbours and family by setting her tap water on fire.

Ernst lives just outside Rosebud, a hamlet of fewer than 100 people known for its thriving cultural centre.

The area, about 100 kilometres north-east of Calgary, is also part of a rapidly expanding coal bed methane development by EnCana. There are high hopes

that this relatively new resource will boost flagging conventional natural gas stocks in Alberta.

But with the latest drilling boom comes fear because of what has happened south of the border.

In Wyoming and Colorado, coal bed methane development has caused serious land and water problems. In rare cases, methane has migrated from wells into well water.

More commonly, ranch land was reduced to hardpan by faulty water disposal and was further degraded by a dense cross-hatching of roads, well pads and pipelines.

Alberta vowed not to let the same bungling happen here.

See METHANE / A15



NEW VEHICLE CREDITED WITH
SAVING 3 IN AFGHAN BLAST / A3

Voter goodies a family affair

NDP unveils day-care plan; Tories tout sports a

MIKE BLANCHFIELD,
PETER O'NEIL
and ANNE DAWSON
CanWest News Service
TORONTO



■ Full election
coverage / A4-5

Canada's children continued to push the election campaign agenda Monday as the NDP unveiled its day-care strategy and the Conservatives offered an annual \$500 tax credit for families with kids in organized sports.

NDP Leader Jack Layton announced his party's \$8.7-billion plan in Toronto, saying it would help families get affordable, safe access to day care.

Layton said New Democrats would create 200,000 child-care spaces in the first year, in licensed, non-profit

facilities, with about 25,000 more spaces in the next years.

The NDP would also boost the federal child tax credit by \$1,000 over four years to help lower-income families cover child-care costs and other essential expenses, he said.

See FAMILY / A16

Blow from goalie stick left three teeth on ice at old-timers game, jury told

Netminder pleads not guilty to aggravated assault over 2004 game

CHRIS PURDY
Legal Affairs Writer
EDMONTON

Andrew Pronyshyn was playing for the Ardrossan

vated assault and possession of a dangerous weapon — his hockey stick.

Pronyshyn, a 35-year-old bank manager from Sherwood Park, dabbed his eyes with a tissue as he described how the goalie's stick tore through his top lip



INSIDE TODAY



Sunny breaks.
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Tainted water lights fire under gas fears

Southern Alberta woman suspects her polluted well may be linked to growing coal bed methane industry

Hanneke Brooymans
The Edmonton Journal

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

ROSEBUD - Jessica Ernst became concerned about her well water when her taps started to whistle loudly.

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CREDIT: Chris Schwarz, The Journal

The methane concentration in Jessica Ernst's well water is so high that, ...
... she can light a flame by holding a lighter to the lip of a bottle of tap water. [comment: front page]

The provincial government set up a committee -- with members from companies such as EnCana, environmental groups and landowners -- to help develop regulations for the fledgling industry.

The gently rolling prairie around Rosebud is studded with new coal bed methane wells. Bright red metal fences curve protectively around each small well, giving them the look of large spiders crouched on the shorn winter fields.

EnCana vehicles are so common in the area, the company posts its own speed limit signs.

Coal bed methane production differs from conventional natural gas production. The gas doesn't come out as easily because it's trapped in seams of coal. And often, the seams are in salt or fresh water, which must be drained before the methane can be pumped out.

Coal bed methane wells must also be grouped more closely together for the gas to be pumped out effectively.

Ernst, the Rosebud-area resident, just learned from Norwest Labs that she has high concentrations of methane in her tap water -- so high that she can get a blue flame by holding a lighter to the lip of a bottle of tap water.

She thought the lab had made a mistake when she read that a sample of her well water contained 44,800 parts per million of methane. There is a risk of explosion at as little as about one part per million if the water passes through a poorly ventilated air space, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers has warned.

Ernst, who works on environmental impact assessments for the oilpatch, now keeps a bright yellow gadget about the size of a cellphone on her kitchen table. The device, sent by a worried geologist friend, measures the concentration of methane in the air.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "I'm still in denial."

Ernst also had the well water of two other homes in the area tested. One had 30,000 parts per million of methane, and the other 2,400 parts per million.

Ernst won't point fingers, but she knows there has been methane contamination of some wells from coal bed methane development in the U.S.

And she knows her well was fine until about 21/2 years ago.

Nga de la Cruz, manager of the coal bed methane project for Alberta Environment, acknowledges the American problems.

"But so far we really haven't documented the migration of methane from a coal bed methane well (in Alberta)," she added.

Bob Curran, a spokesman for the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, said it's possible for methane to migrate into a water well, but it's extremely rare.

Both de la Cruz and Curran said methane can also be created by bacteria in a poorly maintained well. Ernst said she has her well treated annually with chlorine.

In the past three to four years, EnCana investigated complaints about 30 water wells in Western Canada, said Scott Ranson, the company's communications manager.

About 10 of those complaints involved coal bed methane wells, mostly alleging reduced water flow or other contaminants. Few have been investigated for methane migration.

EnCana, which has drilled about 1,000 coal bed methane wells in Alberta in the last three years, will conduct tests or send in an independent third party if a landowner with whom it has a lease is concerned about the water.

"Nobody here wants to go into a landowner's property and leave behind a problem with something as basic as water," Ranson said.

No direct links have been found between water problems and the company's wells, he said.

It's possible, Ranson said, that water wells drilled into coal seams could end up drawing methane when aquifers go dry, just as industry draws the water out to get to the gas.

Whatever the reason for Ernst's tainted well, feedback on draft recommendations by the government committee showed "significant concern" about Alberta's fresh water supplies.

The government plans to release a summary of these comments with the final recommendations, which are due this month.

A copy of the comments obtained by The Journal shows Albertans are adamant that the government must ensure aquifers aren't damaged.

"I am a farmer and am very concerned that the coal bed methane will ruin our drinking water supply and wells will go dry," wrote one Albertan.

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adf0-41f6-bb3b-a02610475069](http://www.canada.com/edmontonjournal/story.html?k=55507&id=798b13d1-adf0-41f6-bb3b-a02610475069)

hbrooymans@thejournal.canwest.com

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Methane pollution of nearby wells very rare: province

METHANE

Continued from A1

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Radio station sells newscast

*The Associated Press
MADISON, WIS.*

A radio station has sold the naming rights to its newsroom, sparking concern that advertisers had crossed a line and could begin to influence coverage.

The WIBA newsroom in Madison will be known as the Amcore Bank News Center beginning Jan. 1, a bank spokeswoman said.

"What listeners will hear on air is something like, 'Now from the Amcore Bank

Owners blame high cost of ne

News Center, here's WIBA's Jennifer Miller," said Jeff Tyler, vice-president of Clear Channel Radio-Madison, which owns WIBA-AM 1210 and FM 101.5.

The deal's financial terms weren't disclosed.

Tyler said there are many other examples of selling naming rights in broadcasting. Clear Channel Milwaukee's WISN-AM 1130 sold its newsroom nam-

ing rights said.

Tyler said the deal was expensive and insisted it was a comparison.

It wasn't a comparison, C. Inc., a San Francisco company that over-

Gaffe flunks half of Ohio students

*The Associated Press
COLUMBUS, OHIO*

A testing company faces a fine after it mistakenly failed hundreds of students on Ohio's new graduation test, state education officials said Monday.

Measurement Inc. graded 1,599 tests and failed 890 students after accidentally converting raw test data to passing and failing grades, the state said.

The error was made on tests given last summer to students entering their junior and senior years, as well as students who were in 12th grade last year but

haven't graduated.

Whether the test was the only thing keeping any students from graduating, and whether anyone might have wrongly been sent back to school this fall, wasn't immediately clear.

The scores have since been corrected; 272 affected school districts were to be notified this week. The new scores still weren't enough to pass for 543 students.

The Durham, N.C.-based company said it's the first time it made an error big enough to warrant a fine. The fine, which still must be negotiated, would be paid to the state.

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Ernst won't point fingers, but she knows there has been methane contamination of some wells from coal bed methane development in the U.S.

And she knows her well was fine until about 2½ years ago.

Nga de la Cruz, manager of the coal bed methane project for Alberta Environment, acknowledges the American problems.

“But so far we really haven't documented the migration of methane from a coal bed methane well (in Alberta),” she added.

Bob Curran, a spokesman for the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, said it's possible for methane to migrate into a water well, but it's extremely rare.

Both de la Cruz and Curran said methane can also be created by bacteria in a poorly maintained well. Ernst said she has her well treated annually with chlorine.

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No direct links have been found between water problems and the company's wells, he said.

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