

WATER BETTER BE OK; RALPH VOWS TO INTERVENE ON COALBED METHANE COMPLAINTS

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Premier Ralph Klein has vowed to intervene on behalf of Alberta families who claim their drinking water has been so contaminated with coalbed methane that they fear their homes could explode.

The premier said coalbed methane drilling - which has created serious environmental problems in the U.S. - is important to the economy, but his government must make sure it's done right.

He gave his personal guarantee the concerns of suffering families will be addressed.

"I am willing to extend that to the fullest extent," he told reporters yesterday. "Whatever is necessary to be done will be done."

But Klein and his energy and environment ministers stopped short of declaring a moratorium on drilling that was demanded by the Opposition Liberals.

Liberal environment critic Dr. David Swann called on Klein to halt coalbed methane drilling until stricter regulations are in place to safeguard Albertans.

"It's totally unacceptable for the province to be allowing this coalbed methane development with no groundwater management plan," Swann said.

He called for an emergency debate of the issue in the legislature, but it failed to win the unanimous consent required.

"This is about protecting Albertans and a vital resource that we depend on for life," he told the assembly. "We cannot wait for a body count."

Rosebud area resident Fiona Lauridsen complained that her tap water is contaminated with such high levels of methane that she can set it ablaze.

The chemicals in her water have burned her skin, but so far no one has accepted responsibility for the problem or offered help, she said.

"The excuse that we need the gas is appalling. It's completely unacceptable. Our lives are being put at risk because the government wants to make money."

Jessica Ernst, another Rosebud-area resident, said she is afraid to turn on her hot water tank for fear she will blow the roof off her house.

"You keep thinking: It's water. It's safe. I can't believe it's dangerous."

Dale Zimmerman, who has 100 head of cattle on a farm near Wildwood, west of Edmonton, said he noticed the gas in his water the day after a new methane well was drilled near his farm.

"You can literally see the gas coming out of the hose," he said. "It's a grey white cloud."

He said his cattle stopped drinking the water and it's not safe for either drinking or bathing.

His well was tested by a consultant hired by the gas exploration company last September and he hasn't heard from them since, he said.

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Illustration:

- photo of JESSICA ERNST
- 'It's dangerous'