

INFLAMING A COM

ALBERTA LANDOWNERS CLAIM COAL-BED METHANE DRILLING CONTAMINATES THEIR WATER. OR ARE THEY JUST REVIVING OLD RIVALRIES BETWEEN FARMERS AND INDUSTRY? ■ BY CYRIL DOLL



Jessica Ernst of Rosebud, Alta., sets her tap water alight. She claims her well is contaminated by methane from nearby CBM drilling sites

Sure Alberta is awash with oil and gas, but pulling the valuable resources out of the ground doesn't make every Albertan grin from ear to ear. In fact, you'd have to be pretty cheesed—as 120 landowners apparently were—to give up watching your province's own Edmonton Oilers battle out game two of the Stanley Cup finals to attend a government-sponsored symposium on the safety of coal-bed methane. At a spartan community hall in Trochu, Alta., farmers let their emotions do the talking as they heatedly challenged officials from the government and the energy industry, who were trying calmly to reassure the audience that there was virtually no danger to their well water as a result of nearby coal-bed methane drilling. But locals weren't buying it. "Just because you have

distinctions at the end of your name doesn't mean nothing," shouted one farmer at the panel—which included members of the Farmers' Advocate, Alberta's Energy and Utilities Board, the Canadian Society for Unconventional Gas, and Alberta Environment—before storming out to audience cheers.

Landowners insist that they're the sacrificial lamb on Alberta's holy altar to oil and gas—and the billions in revenues it brings the province. As energy firms tap methane deposits attached to coal seams thousands of metres below the surface, using shockwaves (known as fracing, pronounced "fracking"), rural dwellers say that, at the same time, the methane is vibrating its way into their groundwater. Ever since the coal-bed methane industry took off in 2003, at least three Albertans