

MLAs poised to start tour

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The legislature's Select Committee Regarding the Risks and Benefits of Hydraulic Fracturing will begin its three-day information-gathering trip to Alberta on Monday.

The six-person committee will spend its first two days in Red Deer. There, it's scheduled to tour the Alberta Energy Regulator Field Centre and meet with Sundre Petroleum Operators Group. That organization facilitates dialogue between industry, government, and communities.

On the second day, the committee will visit a hydraulic fracturing site in Red Deer and a conventionally producing well before travelling back to Calgary.

Jessica Ernst, a resident of Rosebud, Alta., brought a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against Encana. She claimed the company's fracking contaminated her drinking water, and questioned why the committee opted to visit a fracking site in Red Deer.

"They could just stay in Calgary and tour endless frack sites 20 minutes around Calgary," Ernst said. That would have saved the committee considerably in driving time, she argued.

Ernst suggested the committee should visit sites in the Lochend area just outside Calgary, which she said is being heavily impacted by fracking.

"But of course, the industry doesn't want anyone to go there because it's a disaster zone," she said.

"If they really wanted to see the true impacts, they would efficiently use their two days here and spend it touring actual fracked communities, rather than spending it touring around in a bus with propaganda groups paid for by oil and gas," she continued.

"I really thought that they would

recognize how vital it is to tour probably the most impacted part of Alberta."

Committee chair Patti McLeod said today the committee asked officials from the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources to design a tour that would meet its mandate, which the committee tweaked before adopting.

"We have to remember that not all operators are quite willing to drop what they're doing to take on a tour of this size," McLeod told the *Star*.

The Yukon Party MLA for Watson Lake would not say which company will be providing the tour.

She noted the company asked the committee not to release its name until after the tour due to safety concerns.

Ernst, meanwhile, also wonders why the committee hasn't reached out to speak with her, considering her lawsuit against Encana.

But the committee is meeting with a group of Albertans concerned about the impact of fracking specifically in the Lochend area, the Cochrane Area Under Siege Coalition.

"As a committee, we're always looking for a balance of opinions and thoughts to help us in our deliberations, and the committee felt that this would be a good group to spend a little time with and hear their stories," McLeod said.

The committee will meet with CAUS-C on the third day of its tour.

It's also scheduled meetings with Alberta Health Services, Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, and Bernhard Mayer, a professor from the Department of Geology and Geophysics at the University of Calgary.

See letter, p. 9.