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Moratorium on coalbed-methane drilling needed to cool frenzy

NDP wants answers to tough questions first, fears irreparable damage if development advances

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Coalbed-methane development in Alberta provides a cautionary lesson about the destructive impact of rapid exploitation of our resources.

Declining conventional natural gas reserves have driven gas producers to coalbed methane, the new energy mega-project "kid on the block," sprouting up in the heart of central Alberta. Coalbed-methane development in Alberta is fast and furious, with more than 7,000 wells drilled since 2002, and another 50,000 expected in the next decade. This rapid exploitation of coalbed methane -- the extraction of natural gas trapped in coal seams -- has raised serious concerns about the environment, water safety, noise pollution, land use and property rights, all of which must be answered before further development proceeds.

Water contamination

Most serious of these concerns is water contamination. Drilling for coalbed methane can interfere with the integrity of groundwater as gas and saline water migrates from coal seams into water wells and aquifers, contaminating them.

Currently, more than 600,000 Albertans and 90 per cent of rural Albertans rely on groundwater for their cattle, crop irrigation and household use. And as Alberta's population balloons and fresh water supplies dwindle, dependency on groundwater continues to grow, while safe supply is at risk.

Our rural landscapes are also at risk. Since coalbed-methane wells produce smaller amounts of gas compared with conventional wells, companies need a higher density of wells -- up to eight wells per square mile compared to one well for conventional gas -- to be profitable.

This "densification" of wells has caused a myriad of problems for landowners, including increased truck traffic, constant drilling and noise pollution and the transformation of rural communities into industrial zones.

And there is very little recourse for a landowner who does not want coalbed-methane drilling on their land.

Wells and pipelines get in the way of cultivation, and land values are in jeopardy in areas with intense drilling.

For these reasons, Alberta's NDP has called for a moratorium on new coalbed-methane drilling until a proper management framework is put in place. Environmental and legal questions must also be answered to avoid irreparable damage before further development proceeds.

A green and prosperous future for Albertans is possible through environmentally sound solutions for responsible coalbed-methane development.

David Schindler, a world-renowned water expert, the Pembina Institute, Preston Manning and others agree that if we do not develop carefully, coalbed methane will have an irreversible negative impact on Alberta's water, landscape and eco-diversity.

Controlled development

We need a vision for an environment worthy of our children and grandchildren. This means we must develop only what we can properly manage.

Most immediately, we must focus on the extensive coalbed-methane drilling that is already underway to ensure existing wells are not endangering our health, community or environment.

Baseline testing for water flow and contamination must also be expanded and executed in a more thorough and rigorous manner.

Alberta Environment must be given the resources and regulatory muscle to study the cumulative impacts of coalbed-methane activity, over a wide area and over a long period of time.

Landowners in areas of coalbed-methane drilling should also be applauded for raising the alarm to the negative effects of intensive drilling.

We must make changes to the Surface Rights Act, which governs how energy companies can access private land.

Often these landowners have owned this land for generations and have developed skills that would contribute to effective, sustainable development.

Finally, the government must take a long, sober look at why they are in such a headlong rush to develop coalbed methane.

Who is really benefiting from this rampant, runaway development?

CONSERVE NATURAL GAS

Coalbed methane has value because conventional reserves of natural gas are in decline. We should look at ways to conserve our natural gas reserves, instead of simply exploiting and exporting them at maximum speed.

Why not develop renewable energy resources and invest in energy efficiency to reduce our reliance on dwindling and increasingly expensive hydrocarbon reserves?

Coalbed-methane gas will not go bad, disappear, nor lose its value if it stays in the ground a little longer.

So let's take our time and develop a system of best practices for the existing coalbed-methane wells.

Let's judiciously plan for how to responsibly develop this resource, to ensure a supply for domestic consumption, while preserving the water and the land, on which we depend, for future generations of Albertans.

David Eggen is environment critic for Alberta's NDP

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