

Fears about coalbed methane

By RIC SWIHART, Lethbridge Herald
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GRANUM — Uncertainty about the potential impact on lifestyle, water and air quality by potential coalbed methane exploration and development in the dryland farming community filled the Blunden Hall Friday.

Four speakers kept the crowd of 200 on edge, answering questions over coffee. Jessica Ernst, head of Ernst Development Services at Rosebud, said loss of legal right to one's land perhaps is the most critical concern about coalbed methane development. And she speaks from direct contact with the industry.

"I love the quiet, but after living in the vicinity of coalbed methane development, I can't even stand to listen to music," she said. "I fell in love with the big sky and the powerful spirit of the people in Alberta and I can't believe we powerful people, especially the farmers and ranchers, are allowing the rape and pillage that is taking place in Alberta." On 15 sections around her land, the number of wells averages 11 per parcel. "Now, they want to do more."

Ernst cautioned the money involved for landowners with such energy projects is good. "But it isn't worth it if you lose your lifestyle, your farm, your water," she said. "I would rather eat beans if it means getting my quiet back."

University of Lethbridge geologist Jim Bryne painted a picture of greed driving the massive development of natural resources in Alberta and the resulting pollution and environmental risk. He said Alberta is planning big increases to electrical generation capacity and very little is considered green power. He is concerned coalbed methane development plans are also included on the Alberta Energy agenda. CBM has its detractors, he said. And rightly so, since there is no evidence of any sound science being done on CBM.

"My idea is not to do any work on coalbed methane until we are assured things are done right," said Bryne.

Mike Dawson of Calgary, president of the Canadian Society for Unconventional Gas, formerly called the Coalbed Methane Forum, is an expert on the geology aspects of coalbed methane developments. His organization tries to foster and develop accurate information about the gas resource and its reasonable exploration. Shallow coalbed methane development in Alberta is a recognized technology, he said.

"We are trying to make sure the information provided to stakeholders is correct and land holders understand it," he said. He offered some cautions. If a company wants to drill on your land, ask for zero disturbance, he said. They don't have to make large cuts.

Alberta Energy Utilities Board has many compliance guides for developers. In most cases, the companies are complying with them, he said.

If a company is coming to develop low-pressure wells, ask where the noisy compressors will be located and what technology will be used to reduce the noise, he suggested. Coalbed methane is no different from any conventional shallow gas well development, Dawson said.

Dan Johnson, a U of L environmental science professor who specializes on ecosystem environmental sustainability, said there are many facts about the southern Alberta foothills environment involving around methane. The more you know, the better you can deal with issues, he said. It also allows people to pressure for the right things to be done. But, he said there is a need for more monitoring and a stronger knowledge base. He fears there could be up to 16 wells per section of land.

Johnson said it is time to put a value on all aspects of life, including having access to clean air and water, and quiet if wanted. If there is a valuable natural resource in the ground somewhere and somehow, it will come out. The key is to make sure it comes out with no environmental degradation, he said. The key is working to keep the whole water system clean and healthy.

Johnson said the big concern when discussing coalbed methane development is the lack of baseline data so the full impact of the exploration and development can be measured. It is time for Alberta to get active and do original research and study on the impacts of methane development, said Johnson. Montana has loads of research that helps provide guidelines, he added.

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