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Drawing a Line in the Foothills against CBM Development

By Barbara Janusz

The windmills overlooking the hamlet of Cowley were uncharacteristically still for a July afternoon in southwest Alberta. Their inertia contrasted dramatically with the steady flow of recreational traffic heading north on Highway 22, designated by the province as the "Cowboy Trail."

Unlike the vacationers traveling back toward Calgary, we were heading south to Lundbreck Falls campground at the intersection of Highways 22 and 3, five km west of Cowley; the campground was the venue for an evening meeting of the Livingstone Landowners Group (<http://www.livingstone-landowners-group.net>). A loosely organized association of ranchers, their raison d'etre for organizing against "Big Oil" is not so much about their right to raise cattle in the pristine foothills, known as the Porcupine Hills, as it is everything to do with stewardship of the land – much of it passed on through three or four generations.

Here, on the southeastern slope of the Rockies, is a unique ecosystem known as montane landscape, where prairie flows into rugged alpine. The only other montane ecosystem on the planet is in Spain's Pyrenees Mountains. In Alberta's Porcupine Hills, aboriginal peoples likened the coniferous vegetation sprouting from the rolling, grassy hills to porcupine quills. Beneath the conifers, though, the land is not barren. In midsummer, the prairie grasses and flowers grow waist high, and when the settlers discovered this paradise over a century ago, a man on horseback disappeared in a sea of grassland.

As a Calgarian who has owned recreational property in the Crowsnest Pass, west of the Porcupine Hills, since 1999, I hardly personify a steward of the land. Nonetheless, when I heard about the Calgary oilpatch's plans to exploit the coalbed methane (CBM) seams in the Porcupine Hills, I couldn't just sit back and watch events unfold according to Big Oil's latest pitch to investors about the profitability of CBM development.

CBM extraction differs from conventional natural gas drilling because of the sheer density of wells required. South of the border, in New Mexico's San Juan County, Linn Blancett and his wife, Tweeti, lease 32,000 acres of grazing land for cattle that they've had to sell off, after 450 wells and associated compressors, pipelines, and access roads devastated the landscape.

Tweeti, one of three guest speakers at the Livingstone Landowners' meeting, gave a slide presentation that documented the ugly ramifications of CBM extraction. One slide showed one of hundreds of dugouts, fitted with plastic liners, for the collection of toxic waste water extracted in the drilling process. Fumes from these dugouts have polluted the air and noxious weeds have invaded the native prairie. The Blancetts are now embroiled, with other local ranchers, in messy litigation to oppose a proposal to drill a further 10,000 oil and gas wells in the San Juan basin.

In Alberta, the County of Wheatland is experiencing intense CBM extraction in the Horseshoe Canyon play, which extends northwest of Edmonton to southwest of Lethbridge. Jessica Ernst, a member of the Valley Group of eight families in the Rosebud area, was the second of the Livingstone Landowners' guest speakers. Jessica is an environmental consultant with 23 years of petroleum industry experience. Despite having kept EnCana Corp. off her 50 acres near Rosebud, she is surrounded by seven compressor stations that have shattered the peaceful serenity of her rural community.

EnCana regularly hosts CBM tours of the Horseshoe Canyon play, replete with information packages that include a five-page handout on Frequently Asked Questions about Natural Gas in Coal, issued by Alberta Energy. In June, I attended the day-long tour, which comprised touring a methane gas well and





associated compressor station; lunch in Drumheller, followed by a discussion about geology at the rim of Horseshoe Canyon; and a final stop at one of the compressor stations near Rosebud that Jessica Ernst mentioned. Prior to reaching this final stop of the tour, the bus pulled over and we were asked to walk about two city blocks to the compressor station, presumably to hear first-hand its attenuated noise level.

Jessica explained that her community's requests for public consultation regarding excessive compressor noise were initially dismissed by EnCana due to Rosebud's tiny population. Persistent complaints over two years resulted in the company installing a separate attenuation building on one of the seven noisy compressors – the one I visited on the last leg of the EnCana tour. The other six compressors continue to hum and whine. The Valley Group is also concerned about the effects of CBM extraction on groundwater. Jessica says that consultation with EnCana about landowners' wells drying up has proven as ineffective as that related to concerns about compressor noise.

The land can no longer be all things to all people, as land-use ecologist Brad Stelfox of consulting firm Forem Technologies in Bragg Creek, the third speaker at the Livingstone Landowners' meeting, illustrated in a presentation on land use in Alberta. Factoring in a conservative projected population increase of 1.8 percent annually, while projecting the future growth of industry and urban development, Brad showed how Alberta's land mass can no longer sustain all the competing interests of industry, agriculture, urban sprawl, and recreation. The inescapable conclusion is that Alberta is at a crossroads – Albertans face some hard choices.

Despite it being haying season, 200 people packed the community hall in Cowley. Brad suggested the need to focus oil and gas activity in certain regions by establishing a "Hydrocarbons Production Zone" in areas where the industry is already ensconced. Several members of the audience voiced their support for such a plan; others suggested a province-wide moratorium on CBM development until more is learned about its ecological impact. Many felt that they could not rely on government to protect the public interest. Brad told us that we have been complacent. We are all to blame for not waking up sooner to the reality that our current standard of living is unsustainable.

I thought of the windmills, the chinook winds that propel them, and the clean energy we are capable of harnessing; about all the creeks and streams that flow through the Livingstone range and empty into the Porcupine Hills watershed.

My instincts tell me that our water will run out before oil and gas, and that the only solution is to draw a line here, in this unique and precious foothills landscape. Like an addicted gambler who can't or won't walk away from the poker table with his winnings, we risk everything by compromising with industry on CBM development in the Porcupine Hills.

Barbara Janusz is a lawyer and freelance writer who has recently relocated to the Crowsnest Pass and can be reached at cv213389@allstream.net. This article was reprinted with permission from Enviroline 16(8-9): 18-19, August 30, 2005.

