

Proposed drilling sets off deep unrest



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When 400 people took to the streets of Smithers recently to protest against proposed coal-bed methane development in the Bulkley Valley, it was a signal of deep unrest in the heartlands.

Smithers, for those who haven't been lucky enough to visit, is a picturesque little town where the people are relaxed, openly friendly and clearly in love with the magnificent landscape that surrounds them. They hike, they ski, they hunt and they fish in the great salmon rivers that flow out of the Hazelton and Skeena Mountains.

The people in the Bulkley Valley appreciate how important resource development is. They see logging and mining trucks daily on the highway that runs through town. Pull up a chair in a coffee shop in Smithers and there is a good chance someone at the next table will have muddy boots on.

These are hard-working folk, in touch with the land, who are the epitome of the heartlands with which this government likes to identify. And when they get mad enough to spill out into the streets, you can bet something has gone wrong with government outreach.

Opposition to a government proposal to open the area to coal-bed methane drilling — which extracts gas from coal beds and produces huge volumes of waste water containing salt and metals — has been building for the past year. So has the sense that the people of the Bulkley Valley aren't being listened to by Victoria.



PAT MOSS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Protesters take to the streets of Smithers last month in a rally against coal-bed methane development in the Bulkley Valley. Leading the march is 91-year-old Hazel McKenzie.

That feeling was reinforced recently when Dennis MacKay, the Liberal MLA for the area, dismissed opponents as a noisy minority.

After attending a packed public forum at which speaker after speaker opposed coal-bed methane extraction, Mr. MacKay told *The Interior News* there was a "large silent majority" out there who weren't concerned enough to attend.

"Furthermore, MacKay suggests the government would not be hampered by public opinion," the newspaper report said. "The province and cabinet has said we will base our decisions on science," he said.

If a packed rally and a march through the streets isn't enough to get the message across to Mr. MacKay and his political colleagues,

perhaps they will take note of a poll — a scientific poll no less — released today by the Northwest Institute.

The poll, conducted by Synovate Research, a global market-research firm, found that almost 70 per cent of residents "agree that the potential benefits of coal bed methane are not worth the potential risk to wild salmon and steelhead and 60 per cent agree that the proposal poses an unacceptable risk to drinking water."

Some 87 per cent felt the government should not sell development rights for coal-bed methane drilling and only 32 per cent thought government efforts to consult with residents were adequate.

The poll, which is based on a sample of 300, has a margin of error

of plus or minus 6 per cent.

On Friday, Citizens Concerned About Coalbed Methane, a local action group formed last year, submitted to provincial authorities a report detailing major concerns.

Topping the list are fears that current regulations, which allow drilling operations to discharge up to 1,850 cubic metres of contaminated water a day into streams, won't protect the Bulkley Valley's groundwater or its salmon rivers. The government last year brought in a "code of practice" to replace regulations that required operators to acquire pollution permits. Under the new rules companies regulate themselves and can discharge water that is toxic to fish. The high standards set by the B.C. government say polluted water is accep-

table as long as half the rainbow trout placed in a test sample live for four days.

If only half the fish go belly up, the waste water is okay.

The regulations set no minimal levels for total suspended solids, dissolved oxygen, temperature, ammonia, nitrite or nitrate.

Some science.

No wonder Bulkley Valley residents are worried about what will happen to the rivers and wells in their backyards.

In Montana, Wyoming and Alberta, where coal-bed methane gas drilling is widespread, there have been serious problems with groundwater pollution.

Under B.C. regulations, operators can discharge waste water near drinking water withdrawal

points, as long as they assess the impact and report to affected users

That means if Bulkley Valley residents one day find their drinking water stinks, or tastes bad, or emits gases that burn at the tap nozzle (as has happened in Alberta), they will get a piece of paper explaining why

The people of the valley have taken a long hard look at coal-bed methane extraction and its weak regulatory controls and said no.

The government should spike this project. And before trying to shove coal-bed methane down the throat of some other small town in the B.C. heartlands, it should revise its regulations — and stop giving industry the right to kill fish and pollute drinking water.

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