

Front Page: 'Frack hell is imminent'

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Caroline Zentner
lethbridge herald
czentner@lethbridgeherald.com

In Alberta's oil- and gas-driven economy, Jessica Ernst has experienced painful lessons for speaking out about the consequences of hydraulic fracturing. As an environmental scientist, Ernst did environmental impact assessments and environmental protection plans for oil and gas companies like EnCana, the company that, along with the ERCB (Energy Resources Conservation Board) and the Alberta government, she has filed legal action against. She continues to do contract work although her business has suffered since she started speaking out against fracking, the process that requires large amounts of water and chemicals be injected into the ground to force the release of oil and gas. The well on her property near Rosebud was poisoned by methane gas and other toxins and she must now haul water from outside sources.

"Speaking out has cost me the business pretty well. I still have it and maybe that'll change but I also recognized that when I resigned from EnCana in 2004, because I was doing consultation work for EnCana at the time up north, when community members came to me and reported that EnCana was lying to them," Ernst said in an interview before her presentation at a special session of the Southern Alberta Council on Public Affairs Thursday evening. "I have learned that in Alberta you are to toe the line whether you're an oil patch consultant or a citizen."

Ernst said "frack life" started for her in 2003 with compressor noise. Compressors are used to help suck the gas out of the ground or to increase the pressure to get it down the pipeline. About 15 water wells in the area have been contaminated.

"When we began questioning what was happening they actually even told us there was still no coalbed methane around us and that they would never fracture anywhere near our drinking water supply, they would always be far below it and in fact far below the impermeable layers to protect gas from migrating into water," she said. "We were told the problems in America would never happen to us."

Ernst isn't surprised more and more people are opposed to oil and gas development in their neighbourhoods.

"Yes, everybody has the right to be very afraid and very suspicious," she said. "I have learned painfully that I trust no politician in this province, I trust no regulator staff at the ERCB and I trust nobody at Alberta Environment. And I certainly do not trust the companies. I think they know they are contaminating the water. And I think they knew before they even started that they were going to and that's why they fractured as many communities as possible in secret. I don't believe Rosebud's the only place where they fractured drinking water aquifers in Alberta."

Ernst also said Alberta continues to make things easier for oil and gas companies through deregulating. Other jurisdictions, including Quebec and France, either have moratoriums or bans in place.

"In my presentation I say frack hell is imminent," she said. "The other thing they're doing is they're dumping their undisclosed waste on our agricultural lands. They did it down in Suffield on the grasslands."

Ernst said she used to believe oil and gas development could be done right with proper regulation and oversight. But her research has convinced her hydraulic fracturing is risky even if it's done right. Typically, the companies will divide people in the community by offering bribes, she said. But communities that refuse to be divided are strong and that can expand into entire regions



photo by Ian Martens
Environmental scientist Jessica Ernst speaks on hydraulic fracturing during a special session of the Southern Alberta Council on Public Affairs Thursday night at the University of Lethbridge.

standing together.

"We all think we have no power," Ernst said. "But what I learned in this frack war is I never knew how powerful I was."

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