

Water wars simmer...

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Farmers in the dry foothills of southwestern Alberta are taking on the oil and gas companies over seismic testing and its effect on water supplies. This latest volley in an intensifying struggle between ranchers and oil and gas companies over scarce water resources has implications for farm communities cross Canada.

Wells are drilled where seismic testing indicates the potential for energy reserves below the earth's surface. The rights for oil and gas, like minerals, are held by the Alberta Government. But the rights to undertake seismic testing are not, they must be negotiated with the landholder. In fact, a seismic tester cannot set foot on a farmer's land without permission.

And so when the ranchers in Porcupine Hills denied seismic access to their land out of concern for their water supplies, they were fully within their rights. Problem is, so were the seismic operators when they simply moved their seismic line to the provincial road allowances — running one mile apart east to west and two miles apart north to south — and vowed to use more dynamite to make the bigger booms needed for more distant readings. It's the booms that have the ranchers worried.

Springs that travel down the sandstone hills from the mountains provide the community with water, and supplies are tight. Dry-land ranchers who rely on this water for their livestock are worried that underground blasting will cause fragile sandstone soils to shift, opening fissures that will either send the water down so deep it will not be potable or in a new underground direction entirely. In both cases, causing wells and surface streams to dry up.

Not to worry, said the companies, if your water supply is cut off as a result of our blasting you can appeal under the province's Water Well Restoration or Replacement Program, which will reimburse the costs of a new well.

"With livestock, if we run out of water, we need it restored immediately," said rancher Brian Laycraft, "some government program is not the answer."

And so the ranchers, joined by the local Mayor and outraged citizenry, are now trying to stop the seismic blasting by obtaining an environmentally sensitive area designation. The search for an endangered species — salamander? tree frog? — to justify the designation is on!. Is it not obvious that the endangered species is farmers? According to Canada's 2006 census, in only five years Canada lost 17,550 farms and 19,140 farmers, a drop of 7.1 per cent and 5.5 per cent respectively since 2001.

The principle that oil and gas companies will mitigate and compensate but never hesitate in asserting their exploration rights over the protests of local farmers and municipalities is endangering farm communities across Alberta.

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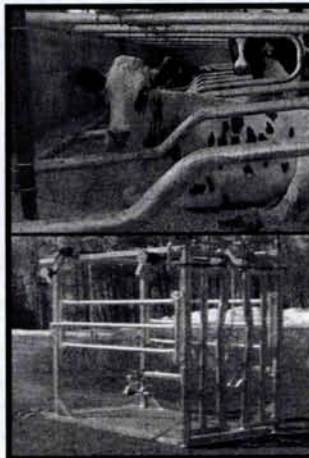
And the water wars brewing in the Porcupine Hills are only the beginning. The conflict between oil and water promise to take on a far darker dimension as water shortages mount. Oil and gas companies are big water users. Much of it is injected into the ground — as water or steam —

to displace and extract energy reserves. Prior to the signing of the FTA and the NAFTA, Canadians were assured by our Federal Government that Canadian sovereignty over our water resources was uncompromised. Turns out, it was: any time water is used in Canada by a US firm — or a firm with U.S. investors — NAFTA rights attach. This means American companies in Canada's oil patch have NAFTA rights to their historic water use. In perpetuity. Rights that farmers on whose land they have their rigs do not have. Rights that will be easily asserted in trade panel rulings as compliance or compensation. U.S. interests in Canada's water are facilitated and protected by NAFTA. No such protection exists for Canadians. Want to pitch in and do something to protect the water rights of Canadian farmers? Here are two suggestions:

1. Make a call or write a letter in support of the water rights of Porcupine Hills ranchers. In the words of Brian Laycraft "Water is a concern for everyone. People should contact their politicians both Federal and Provincial to voice their concern for water and to influence changes. Voters can make governments listen. The problem affects everyone on the South Saskatchewan watercourse."

2. Make your farm group the two hundredth organization to sign The Farmers' Resolution to Exempt Water from the NAFTA. For full information go to www.theholmteam.ca and follow the link. Already passed by 199 farm groups (including Alberta Milk), this is a Canada-wide campaign to develop farm "voice" and farm "authority" in a critical public policy dialogue: the retention of national sovereignty over Canada's water resources. It is not "anti-NAFTA". Nor is it "anti-exports". It is simply about retaining Canada's sovereign right to make decisions for and by communities with respect to water use.

If you have any questions contact me at 604-947-2893 or by email at holm@farmertofarmer.ca



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