

**PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT AND PROVIDING FOR SAFE
RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT ARE CRITICAL CONCERNS FOR OUR
GOVERNMENT AND THE OIL AND GAS COMMISSION**

Op-ed piece by Minister Richard Neufeld
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Recently there have been several media reports that mischaracterized the government's approach to coalbed gas (CBG) development and the current situation in the Kootenays. Readers of the Times Colonist should understand a number of key facts.

It is true that there has been misinformation spread regarding CBG exploration that has led to a lack of understanding regarding the U.S. and Canadian approaches to CBG development. The misinformation has done a lot to elevate this issue – as clearly illustrated in the media by references to the Summit report commissioned by my ministry, which supposedly found big gaps in the knowledge about CBG. Several groups have used this report as grounds for not proceeding with CBG development. In fact, this report did not even study CBG. The consultant hired was asked by my Ministry to determine if there were gaps in environmental baseline data in this region. Not surprisingly some gaps were found and as a result we made it a condition of tenure (caveat) that the successful proponent ensures that all relevant gaps are filled.

The lack of understanding in the US of B.C.'s regulatory regime, along with reports of difficulties encountered in American jurisdictions, together have led to understandable, but unfounded concern. We have learned from the successes and mistakes of other jurisdictions and as a result, we have one of the most advanced and environmentally responsible regulatory environments in North America.

Governor Martz of Montana, who has expressed concerns, should know this as we have sent officials to Montana to meet with her staff and have even invited them on a tour of the Elk Valley. For whatever reason the governor has chosen to ignore this and go over the heads of British Columbians and try to get Ottawa involved. Despite this, we will continue to engage Montana at all levels to ensure that our neighbours understand that we do acknowledge their values and are committed to protecting our shared environment.

While it is true that Fernie Council has also expressed concern about CBG exploration, this concern is not representative of the entire Elk Valley. In fact, Elkford's Town Council has passed a resolution in support of CBG development, and the Mayor of Sparwood has stated that if developed responsibly, he believes his council would support CBG development. Numerous other individuals and community groups in the Kootenays are also supportive of developing this valuable resource.

Officials from the Ministry of Energy and Mines have in fact been in the Kootenays for the last five months seeking input from municipal governments, local organizations and residents. In addition, we have information offices in Fernie, Sparwood and Elkford enabling residents to access information and make informed decisions about potential CBG development. Not only have the concerns raised in the Kootenays registered with the government, we have translated them into conditions (caveats) on the tenure ensuring that residents' concerns are addressed legally. For readers who are interested in more information and/or to receive a copy of the Elk Valley coalbed gas

caveats, please contact the Ministry at (250) 952-0408 or email cbginfo@gems9.gov.bc.ca

It is crucial to understand that tenure rights, and the August 25th auction of those rights in the Kootenays, grant an exclusive right to *apply for* exploration activity in a particular area; they do not confer *the right* to undertake exploration or development activity. The Oil and Gas Commission is required under law to ensure on a project-by-project basis that environmental and social impacts are adequately addressed as part of the approval for any coalbed gas activity. Furthermore, if tenure awards proceed to development they do so step by step, and each step includes a new opportunity for input from the public.

Protecting the environment and providing for safe resource development are critical concerns for our government and the Oil and Gas Commission. It is in everybody's interest to maintain our high environmental standards and unprecedented quality of life in this province.

CBG is developed in Montana, Alberta, and throughout the United States providing thousands of jobs, a secure energy supply and millions in government revenue to support health care and education. I can assure your readers, and all residents of B.C. that we have very high environmental standards and that no development would be allowed that placed B.C. or Montana's environment in jeopardy.

Richard Neufeld
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