

Petro-Canada, ERCB make it difficult to be heard

Dear Editor:

Petro-Canada has applied to the Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) to drill 11 wells on public lands in the foothills and mountains southwest of Calgary (west of Longview). I've tried to encourage Albertans to step in and take control of this process. While I realize this is a near impossible task, until we do step in aggressively, both at the political and regulatory level, we shall continue to be abused by the corporate oil and gas minions who now dominate decisions about our democratic processes and publicly-owned resources.

Here is how the ERCB and the oil and gas industry deny the public access to what ought to be their constitutional rights to be informed, to participate and to control government decisions about our resources. What you see at the right is not accidental; it is the product of 30 years of insider control of public resource decision making.

First, although this is essentially a package project, the ERCB and Petro-Canada break it into 13 separate applications, deliberately complicating the process. Most importantly, this nitpicking allows the ERCB and industry to weasel out of a cumulative effects analysis and an over-arching decision about the feasibility, environmental impact and public interest of the project. Instead of yes or no, which is always the first question that should be asked, the public is nickel and dimed by whether or not one or four or seven parts might be allowed to go ahead, which of course, opens the flood gate.

If members of the public want to be heard as formal intervenors, which in a democratic process should be our right, the ERCB and Petro-Canada force the public "into one box", all to be represented by one spokesperson. Think about that; its like saying we all have to get together before we vote, and decide on how our one vote will be cast. That, sadly, is Alberta's version of fair. If you want to make an independent submission, here's what the board and Petro-Canada force on you: You have to provide the board and Petro-Canada with 11 copies of your submission. Yes, you pick up the cost of democratic participation, saving the oil and gas industry and the regulator, who should have the legal responsibility, the cost and time of facilitating public participation. This is simply another means of crippling public participation. I do not want to be represented by others who will have their own personal interests (or in some cases, biases), yet the ERCB hands Petro-Canada another big leg up by forcing all interested Albertans and parties to be channelled through one voice. It is democratically and scientifically fraudulent.

I decided I would look at making a submission, so I ordered (from Petro-Canada, not from the "independent" regulator, the ERCB) an application. Having to deal with the abuser of public lands and processes is another blow to independent citizen participation. Kind of like the abused husband having to go to his abusive wife for permission to visit the children!

About three weeks ago I received the boxes of documents shown in the photo. They weigh around 21 kilos (45 lb.) and constitute the application. Another six-inch binder came later. This massive pile of documents is what the ERCB and Petro-Canada expected members of the public to digest and analyze and comment intelligently on by July 15. I expected something like this monstrosity, but every time I look at it I'm still taken back.

Even if members of the public have professional skills, it takes an exceptional effort to do justice to a decent commentary on the application as a whole, and do it in weeks. On the other hand, Petro-Canada and the ERCB collaborated in preparing the application over the course of at least six months. There is little honesty in the ERCB process, partly because Petro-Canada and the board have no standards for the preparation of either an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement, so packaging of extra BS by the company and its consultants is overlooked by the ERCB. As a consequence, more drivel ends up as one more way to further overwhelm the public. No standards for evidence presentation, such as expectations that the best available conservation science must be present, make analysis by the public like punching a bag full of hot air. The list of disincentives (more appropriately defined as a barrier) is huge, kind of like the pile of paper.

It is also of note that in this day and age of electronic communication, which the ERCB trumpets routinely in its newsletter, there is no avenue for the public to comment electronically!

It should anger Albertans that, after 50 years of degrading public lands in the foothills and mountains, Ted Morton and the sustainable resource department are only now promising some sort of land management strategy. This is not accidental; with no rules, plundering public resources and land is a piece of cake. But Albertans must question why is it that the theft continues to be "licensed" while presumably there is a plan being put in place to protect us from abuse? It is a perversion to keep beating someone on the head with a two-by-four as you proclaim that you are going to heal that person.

The public has been seriously damaged by these kinds of kangaroo courts, and our resources have been and continue to be looted by the oil and gas industry. After 30-plus years of this kind of abuse, Albertans are deadened by this kind of democratic torment. Our recovery, however, has to start somewhere, and so it is that we must, when ever we can muster the energy and effort, speak up for reform. There is no changing the course of history without stiff resistance to government and corporate abuse.

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