

# Our way of life is on trial in oilpatch hearing

By David Finch, Calgary Herald  
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A hearing is going on in High River. Lawyers for an oil company are grilling people who oppose the development of sour gas wells and a pipeline through part of Kananaskis Country.

The area south and west of Longview is ranching country, but industry argues that it has also been used by the oilpatch, lumber operations and recreational users for decades.

"It is far from untouched by human hands," Petro-Canada's lawyers told the Energy Resources Conservation Board panel on Nov. 13.

Numerous opponents have lined up to challenge the company's plans for this natural gas field.

Ranchers have presented their evidence before the panel, arguing that their way of life is at stake. Rangeland is endangered by this project and others that may follow in its wake.

Natives are questioning the development, too, given that the pipeline would pass near some of their homes in the Eden Valley Reserve.

If an evacuation proved necessary -- sour gas is lethal -- the plan to telephone the natives would fail because many of them do not have phones.

Environmentalists, biologists, botanists and others are criticizing the company's plan, too, pointing out its shortcomings.

Municipal districts, camping companies, outfitters and guides, conservation groups and individuals have also lined up at the microphones for a chance to have their say.

It seems the oilpatch has backed itself into a corner.

But it may not be the oil company that is on trial in High River -- perhaps it's our society. And our way of life for the last 60 years.

A map of the area shows that much of Kananaskis is off-limits to this kind of development. And the company can't put its pipeline along the paved highway -- that's too dangerous. And conservation easements on some of the ranch land preclude oil and gas activity there, too.

According to the Energy Resources Conservation Board, natural gas production in Alberta is expected to drop by about three per cent per year for the next decade.

Nigel Hannaford of the Calgary Herald recently wrote: "Petro-Canada isn't doing anything illegal or unethical, nor is it seeking to bend any regulations in its favour."

But the fact that this development proposal was forced to go to a hearing proves that our society is in crisis: most oil and gas projects are routinely approved. Hearings cost millions of dollars.

Alberta's great wealth -- the provincial government has boasted budget surpluses for about 50 of the last 60 years -- has come from exploiting of our petroleum birthright.

The three men who are charged with the responsibility of passing judgment on this project may be making history. And judging it, too.

Twice as many people live in the province today as in 1980. Drilling activity has increased greatly to find what remains of the scarce oil and gas reserves, resulting in more and more conflict between industry and the public.

During this downturn, we may have the time to reflect on our past, and the fact that we have always been reliant on exports of our natural resources. And that our development process has always assumed easy access to grazing leases, timber berths, and oil and gas properties.

And we have never really taken the long view.

Though the current drop in the price of oil seems like a disaster, it pays to remember that -- adjusted for inflation -- the average price of crude oil over the last 65 years as been \$35 per barrel.

It will take the wisdom of sages to solve this conflict.

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