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Town wants to use new reservoir

By Tamara Neely
staff reporter

Abandoning the historic Royalite (Dingman) #2 well is a complex undertaking, according to the company contracted to do the work, and protecting water is one of its primary goals. Alberta's ministry of Culture and Community Spirit spearheaded organizing an open house on Jan. 20 to provide information to the public about the third effort to abandon the sour gas well located on the site of the old Turner Valley Gas Plant.

The project, estimated to cost \$2 million, is complex for a number of reasons. Precautions must be taken to protect water because the sour gas well is close to the river and two of the three water wells that supply the Town. A further complication is that the well feeds the flame of a naturally occurring flare in the riverbank. The flare exists because gas from the ground is naturally migrating to the flare point. However, sour gas, which is lethal in certain concentrations, is suspected to be leaking through the well and also migrating to the flare.

The engineering company Lionhead Engineering was hired by the Province to conduct the latest abandonment on the Royalite (Dingman) #2 well. Lionhead had several representatives and visual presentations at the open house to answer questions about the latest abandonment.

Water was a concern for several area residents who came to the open house to ask how the Town's water would be kept safe to drink through this process.

Turner Valley Chief Administrative Officer Stan Ogrodniczuk said the water well closest to the Dingman #2 well would be shut off before the abandonment begins and it will be tested before, during and for months after the work is done.

As a precaution, the Town has a plan in place to shut down the second closest water well, called water well #4, if contaminants threaten to enter it. However, water well #4 cannot be shut down until the Town's hydrologist files a report to Alberta Environment of the reservoir testing done to date.

Ogrodniczuk said that because all tests have come in as negative or within allowable limits the Town does not need to wait for approval, they simply need to file.

"Under the minister's order all we needed to do was file, assuming everything is proper," said Ogrodniczuk.

Lionhead cannot begin the re-abandonment project until the process is followed to draw water from the reservoir in case the #4 well does have to be shut off.

"It's just a precaution," said Ogrodniczuk. "(The timing) is all up to our hydrology expert. He's in the process of preparing (the application to Alberta Environment) and we're hoping by next week it'll be filed and we can start using the reservoir – but until I get that, nothing is going to happen."

Also present to answer questions about the re-abandonment of the Dingman #2 well were the two provincial energy industry regulatory agencies, Alberta Environment and Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB).

Turner Valley resident Maureen Nelson said she was pleased to see so many people come out to seek information about the project and oil and gas activities in town.

"I hear comments too often that Turner Valley has so much wrong with it, but these people are not aware of how much work is being done in the area," said Nelson. "You can't walk around this room (the Flare 'n' Derrick hall) without noticing how many millions of dollars have been spent on remediation and reclamation."

High River resident Hugh McKenzie worked in the oil and gas industry for 52 years and has been involved in sour gas well abandonments. He attended the event out of curiosity about new developments. He is impressed with the advances in technology in the industry because they make the work safer on the environment and for the workers.



Turner Valley resident Maureen Nelson peruses information offered by Lionhead Engineering about its plan for abandoning a provincially owned sour gas well. photo by Tamara Neely

“They drilled the Dingman #2 well down so far (almost one kilometre in 1914) and back then it took a year to do it. Now it takes two weeks to do the same thing,” said McKenzie.

He said he is not concerned about the abandonment from a safety point of view.

“I think the environmental stuff around this area is blown out of scale,” said McKenzie. “There’s been too much misinformation.”

He offered himself as evidence of good health despite his exposure over the years to industry chemicals – including during the early years when the regulations to protect workers from chemical hazards were far more lenient than today.

“I’m 81 years of age and I still get up every morning and have breakfast,” said McKenzie.

Kary Cuthill, president of Lionhead Engineering, said re-abandoning the Dingman #2 well is a complex undertaking, but he echoed McKenzie’s views of technological advances. New methods and equipment make them better equipped to handle the deep well than Gulf Oil could when they attempted to re-abandon the well in 1981.

“They (Gulf) didn’t do anything incorrect. Today we have better equipment to deal with these wells and we’ve learned a lot from their operations, things to do differently to be successful,” said Cuthill.

A constant factor through history, however, is that the well sits right in a community.

“The proximity to the town of Turner Valley is unique and we’re very aware of it. We need to make sure if there are any issues that we have an emergency response plan,” said Cuthill.

Before Lionhead can begin the project, their operations plan and emergency response plan must be approved by the ERCB.

Coun. Garry Pollock also attended the open house representing Emergency Management Turner Valley. Pollock is director of the agency, which coordinates emergency response to disaster. He provided information at the open house regarding the agency’s plan for responding to a

sour gas release and instructions for residents to create a home emergency kit in order to be self-sufficient for 72-hours.

Among the necessities a kit should contain is enough water for the family.

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Coun. Garry Pollock, representing the Emergency Management Alberta, an agency which acts as liaison between emergency personnel and the communities of Turner Valley and Black Diamond, provided information at the open house regarding the agency’s plan for responding to a sour gas release and instructions for residents to create a home emergency kit in order to be self-sufficient for 72-hours.

Among the necessities a kit should contain is enough water for the family.