

# Swan Lake Enhancement Society not giving up the fight against Encana's horizontal drilling

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DAWSON CREEK – In the face of an unrelenting oil company—Encana Corporation—and two levels of government which they feel have so far failed them, the Swan Lake Enhancement Society (SLES) is not letting up.

They have brought a petition with 318 signatures from around the South Peace area to the Peace River Regional District (PRRD) board and are asking for support as they attempt to bring their issue to higher levels of government.

“The people in the Peace River communities need a hero, and I think that hero could be the Peace River Regional District,” said Allen Watson of SLES to the PRRD board on June 11.

The small lake (7 kilometres in diameter and only 8 metres deep at its deepest point) is under threat from continued horizontal drilling underneath its waters; in fact Encana is committed to going forward with their drilling project, despite direct opposition from the lake's stewards.

The company plans to drill two wells approximately 3 kilometres from the south shore of the lake, which will pass horizontally under the lake at a depth of 2,600 metres.

This project is projected to begin sometime this fall, likely in October.

Three wells have already been drilled at the north end of Swan Lake by Murphy Oil Corp., a project which SLES says residents were not notified of since the wells passed under crown land: “SLES knew nothing about this drilling and fracking under the lake until it was happening, and obviously we were not able to stop that process,” said Watson.

SLES fears that although Encana's representatives are confident that the method of fracking used in this case is safe and will not harm the lake's waters, there is no guarantee of the lake's preservation from future accidents.

That is not good enough for them.

“What are we asking of the Peace River Regional District? A little more concern about the environment, especially regarding sensitive areas,” Watson said.

“Today there seems to be an obsession of the perceived LNG opportunities, and that’s taken over any common sense it seems.”

Watson and SLES feel that the PRRD have “dropped the ball” in the past in regards to industry and Swan Lake, citing examples such as a residential development in a high mud slide area which the PRRD initially okayed (that development was eventually moved elsewhere on the lake) and the proposed construction of a hazardous waste landfill near the lake which was also approved by the PRRD but did not go forward.

Watson also mentioned “land-spraying” of industrial slurry onto farmer’s fields near the lake, which Watson says was approved by the PRRD and was carried out for two days before an independent analysis of the substance revealed only trace amounts of beneficial sulphur along with other toxic substances, and the spraying was halted.

“It’s stuff like that. Somebody’s not paying attention here,” said Watson.

Watson and SLES are hoping that with the PRRD’s support, their petition and cause will be brought to the North Central Local Government Association (NCLGA) and then to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM).

From there, they are hoping to bring the cause to the provincial government.

“We ask the Peace River Regional District to help us to start stopping this insanity of drilling and fracking near and under our lakes and other sensitive areas,” said Watson to the board, “and if that went through at UBCM, that’s a pretty powerful message to our provincial government, and that’s the way it works.”

“One has to ask that with all this wilderness we have around here, why are they allowed to drill under our precious few lakes in this area.”

Encana’s representatives cite the fact that horizontal drilling has been executed without incidence in ten B.C. lakes already—six by Encana, mostly surrounding Dawson Creek, and four more, including Swan Lake, by other oil and gas producers.

They also say that they will continue to encourage open communication from residents surrounding Swan Lake.

“We are still trying to work with them, trying to address some of their concerns, and continue with that going forward,” said Brian Lieveise of Encana.

“There’s a lot of things that we have done in the past when we’ve been working with the Swan Lake Enhancement Society . . . we’re active in that watershed, so we need to continue to communicate with them . . . environment is important for all of us. And we continue to support initiatives, monitoring and ensuring we have a safe environment to live and work.”

A letter from the Moberly Lake Community Association, which was received by the PRRD board, cited a 2014 study by the Council of Canadian Academies called the Environmental Impacts of Shale Gas Extraction in Canada.

The report is quoted as saying: “. . . because intense development in most shale gas plays has been taking place for less than 20 years, questions about the longer term cumulative effects cannot yet be answered. Experience from other types of contamination shows that impacts on groundwater typically take decades to develop and become increasingly difficult to remediate.”

The SLES petition has been attracting attention from media around the province and also from other concerned groups such as local First Nations and environmental organizations.

Ducks Unlimited owns about 600 acres of wetland at the south end of Swan Lake, and while Brad Armer, Manager of Provincial Operations in B.C., admits that the organization is relieved that the drilling will not take place directly on the shore of the lake but on a slightly removed location, he is still wary of effects the activity could have on sensitive wildlife.

The wetland there is an important habitat for migrating and nesting birds, he says.

McLeod Lake Indian Band also contributed a letter to SLES’s cause: “When there is a sizeable effort from the affected community and organizations that support it, that go toward protecting the land and water that they require to live, should there not be an extension from the regulators and other governing bodies to aid in that protection, rather than dismissing this notion of sustainability because the regulations fall short in providing that protection?” wrote Eran Spence, Senior Land Referral Officer of the

McLeod Lake Indian Band.

Watson stresses that SLES's fight is not with industry, but with government.

"Because they're only doing what the provincial government allows them to do," he said.

"The province should never have allowed the drilling rights under lakes. It's ridiculous, with all these fracking mishaps that are occurring, why put our lake at risk, in the name of LNG?"

Despite a meeting between SLES and Encana's representatives this spring, which Watson says he "naively" felt went well, the company is steadfast in its position that the drilling is safe, and has no plans to halt or postpone the project.

"What we're proposing here can be done safely and responsibly. We're not setting a new precedent; three wells have already been drilled and extended under the north end from an existing operator," said Doug McIntyre, Encana spokesperson.

"We're certainly very much aware of [residents'] concern; minimizing environmental impact is a priority in all of our projects. Numerous environmental considerations are reviewed all the time through both desktop and field assessments to ensure thorough evaluation of any potential impacts.

"We remain committed to consulting and working with them on our area development plans, but we do plan to proceed with the development that we discussed with them during our meeting."

At one time the PRRD had an environmental panel, but it has been dissolved; Watson wondered whether this panel could be reinstated in order to monitor and focus on environmental issues in the the region.

"Since everybody's become aware of this petition, my phone hasn't stopped ringing," said Watson. "It's going to snowball, and I just hope that the authorities do the right thing. We hope that Encana would do the right corporate citizen thing and cancel the project."

PRRD board chair Rob Fraser moved that the matter be reviewed by staff and further discussed at a future PRRD meeting with more information.

The board voted to do so.

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