

Are farms now toxic waste dumps?

By CATHERINE CHEUNG

FONTERRA has recently announced it will not accept milk from new landfarms – farms where drilling wastes from the oil and gas industry have been incorporated into grazing pastures.

This announcement is critical to farmers who may be considering offering their land for drilling waste disposal in Taranaki and also regions where oil and gas exploration is in its infancy.

Yet landfarms are not the only places where toxic wastes may be disposed of.

By 2010, Taranaki Regional Council (TRC) had issued more than 50 consents for Mix-Bury-Cover operations, some of which last for 17 years. These allow solid drilling waste to be mixed with soil and buried in wellsite sumps or pits, which are then reinstated into pasture.

Many of these sites are on, or next to, dairy farms. Is Fonterra taking milk from such sites? Will there be a change in policy similar to that on landfarms?

Moreover, there are numerous other sites with consents for drilling wastes to be discharged to land, water and air. If a farmer or landowner signs a consent for an energy company to drill on his land, he is practically signing away his land rights and control to the company. Such a consent condemns the farm to decades of contamination and assured devaluation, not to mention the potential health impacts and stress on the occupants,

humans and animals alike.

Most Taranaki residents have now heard of fracking (hydraulic fracturing) – the process whereby water (or diesel in the past), sand and chemicals are injected at high pressure into wells, fracturing rocks to release trapped oil and gas.

Since July 2011, the TRC has issued non-notified resource consents, allowing at least 22 new frack jobs to occur at seven wells, without public scrutiny.

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No doubt, many more are in the pipeline, with 140 new wells projected and many old wells to be redrilled across Taranaki.

Importantly, much of the fracking fluid returns to the surface as contaminated waste. At least 70 “fracturing products” (like Halliburton SSO-21) are involved, many containing hazardous, carcinogenic chemicals. Some products have undisclosed constituents – proprietary “trade secrets”.

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In the past two years, the TRC has begun to allow flaring (combustion) involving fracking fluids, at Kapuni, Turangi, and more recently, Kowhai-B wellsite in Tikorangi. Kowhai-B is just 100 metres from a house and 320m from its neighbour.

Material safety data sheets of many fracking chemicals state that they are hazardous, carcinogenic, and when heated, may release toxic gases. Overseas, there are many health cases of people and animals living close to gas wells. Would you be prepared to live next to a flare pit?

Another way of disposing drilling and fracking waste is to inject it deep underground. As of March this year, TRC had issued 22 consents for deepwell injection. Some of these so-called deepwells are not that deep; for example Todd Energy's McKee-4 well is 798m to 970m deep.

Alarmingly, not all operators comply with consent conditions. In April, the TRC issued two abatement notices regarding Cheal Petroleum's deepwell injection programme.

The company, a subsidiary of Tag Oil, had failed to submit complete injection records or follow consent conditions for almost a year.

Nevertheless, in early June, just two months later, the TRC granted new consents for it to discharge contaminants to air, land and water.

Can we trust councils and companies to act responsibly? Should we be treating our precious farmlands as toxic waste dumps?