



Global petroleum company brings fracking threat to Drakensberg

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Monk's Cowl Park in the central Drakensberg © Kevin Ritchie

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An international petroleum exploration company has fired up a fresh application to explore for products in prime farmland in the central Drakensberg and Free State. This follows a government decision to dismiss an appeal by farmers, environmentalists and rural dwellers against earlier controversial applications in the provinces last week.

But the firm is likely to face fierce legal opposition from farmers and environmentalists who are bracing for a fight both in and out of court.

Rhino Oil and Gas Exploration South Africa (Pty) Ltd announced this week that it had lodged an application for an exploration right with the Petroleum Agency of South Africa (Pasa). The application was received on October 11.

The application, which covers 6,060 farms over 1 million hectares, could eventually result in environmentally harmful “fracking” to extract gas, environmentalists have warned, although the company will have to get further approvals for this if the exploration right is granted and the resources are discovered. Fracking poses the potential risk of earth tremors and the contamination of underground and surface water.

Areas affected in the latest fracking application extend from Mooi River and Estcourt North to Winterton, Bergville and Van Reenen, to south of Memel in Free State. The application also covers the Lesotho border, Phuthaditjhaba and Clarens to beyond Bethlehem and Lindley.

Rhino Oil and Gas Exploration South Africa said in its application documents that the exploration work programme was “aimed at indicating if there is an oil or gas resource in the area that would warrant further exploration”.

The company said the proposed exploration activities included “data acquisition and processing through a comprehensive desktop study” and “a full tensor gradiometry gravity survey”, which would be done from the air using survey aircraft.

“No seismic surveys, well drilling, pressure testing, hydraulic fracturing or water abstraction is proposed in the exploration work programme,” the company said.



An international company wants to explore for petroleum products on farmland in the central Drakensberg and Free State

Matthew Hemming, African manager for SLR Consulting, the environmental assessment consultancy handling the scoping and environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the application, said the exploration right would only entitle the firm to explore using methods set out in an approved exploration work programme.

“Any further exploration work to evaluate an identified resource or the future production of oil or gas would require further approval in terms of the MPRDA (Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act) and Nema (National Environmental Management Act). Such approvals will be subject to the relevant legal requirements, which include further public consultation and environmental impact assessment,” Hemming said.

Public consultation meetings will be held in Bergville, Estcourt, Memel, Clarence, Lindley and Harrismith from December 3 to 7.

Janse Rabie, AgriSA head of natural resources, said the farmers' organisation would oppose fracking "anywhere in South Africa".

He said AgriSA was preparing to lodge a review application in the North Gauteng High Court in Pretoria to set aside acting environmental affairs minister Derek Hanekom's dismissal of 39 appeals – from environmental groups like the World Wide Fund for Nature, groundWork, AgriSA, the Bakoena Traditional Council and the Amahlubi Traditional Council – against the granting of four exploration authorisations to Rhino Oil and Gas in September last year.

Hanekom issued his decision in support of the Department of Energy's earlier approval of the expropriation rights, which cover about 2.4 million hectares in the North West, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, on November 9.

Rabie said it was feared that the applications "may lead to large-scale shale gas developments in South Africa, including by means of hydraulic fracturing or 'fracking'."

"Agri SA appealed against the granting of environmental authorisation due to the prevailing uncertainty regarding the availability and possible pollution of water, as well as the air and soil pollution associated with oil and gas developments," Rabie said.

Rabie said farmers were already struggling for water in a water-scarce country and food security would be threatened if a water-thirsty oil and gas industry was launched.

Bobby Peek, director of groundWork, said by dismissing the appeals, Hanekom had opened the door for Rhino Oil and Gas to launch the latest application. He said the organisation would object to the application and it would explore legal options to challenge the application.

"Hanekom has clearly got his head in the sand when everyone, including the International Energy Agency, a conservative group set up to protect the capitalists and big oil, is saying no more fossil fuel, no more release of CO² and Hanekom, who is supposed to be an environmental minister, has said yes," he said.

"Rhino now feels they can win – they clearly feel buoyed and that they have the wind behind them."

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