

'Dangerous' risk

14/11/13
Latrobe
Valley Express

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RECENT heightened fire activity has renewed calls for tighter scrutiny on the emerging gas exploration industry, amid concerns the flaring of gas wells could spark a major grass fire.

Friends of the Earth campaigns coordinator Cam Walker said as the State Government was resisting calls to hold its own comprehensive inquiry of onshore gas exploration activity, it was unleashing a potentially "dangerous" fire hazard risk.

According to a Department of Primary Industries spokesperson, exploration licence holders are allowed to flare gas wells on total fire ban days with a Country Fire Authority permit, which imposes operational requirements including flaring buffer zones and for firefighting equipment to be kept on site with staff to be trained in its use.

However Mr Walker said industry regulations did not prevent a 2010 fire incident at a Lakes Oil tight gas exploration well on Seaspray farmland, which exposed a lapse in a petroleum exploration company's safety protocols.

During a routine well flaring procedure, operator



Concern: A satellite photo details the path of a 10 hectare grass fire which ignited after an ember from a tight gas flaring operation landed in nearby pastures.

source google earth

Petro Tech, a wholly owned subsidiary of Lakes Oil NL - which holds a coal exploration licence (EL) over Toongabbie farmland - a burning ember drifted into nearby grazing pastures, sparking a 10-hectare fire.

The fire quickly spread beyond the company's control, and required five CFA tankers and two bulldozers to control the blaze.

Lakes Oil's Toongabbie EL application ignited widespread community concern in December 2011

due to the inclusion of coal seam gas in its exploration parameters, which inspired the establishment of local campaign group Community Against Mining. According to an incident investigation report obtained under Freedom of Information law by FOE, Petro Tech did not have a towbar equipped car on-site to move a water tanker trailer in range of the fire, while the tank's pump hose was too short.

Despite a requirement for Petro Tech to perform

flaring in accordance with a government accepted operation plan, and for "flaring to be conducted in a manner which eliminated the risk of an uncontrolled fire developing or minimised it so far as was practical", the report concluded "this had not been done".

However the DPI spokesperson said the community could have confidence the flaring would be carried out safely "as it has been for decades at gas plants and refineries around Victoria".