

Floodgates have opened - CSG opponents

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Not happy ... Scenic Hills resident Jacqui Kirkby in front of the coal seam gas well at the Nepean River. *Photo: Edwina Pickles*

THE grinding, clanking whirr of the first commercial coal seam gas well approved under the O'Farrell government can be heard long before the drilling machinery itself can be seen through the trees.

Nearby residents were taken unawares when drilling began a few weeks ago at the well site, operated by the gas company AGL, at Sydney's south-western fringe on the banks of the Nepean River. A further 70 wells are now planned, stretching up along the city's western boundary towards Liverpool.

"The problem is, once these areas are industrialised, they are opened up to further industrialisation," said Jacqui Kirkby, a Scenic Hills resident, who sits on AGL's community consultative committee. "People say, 'oh, you've already got 70 gas wells there, the area's lost its environmental and heritage value, so we might add a light industrial estate in there too', and so on."

When the state government released its long-awaited strategic regional land use plan on Tuesday, it also approved another pending 22 coal seam gas drilling licences across NSW. One of those is petroleum exploration licence number 2, held by AGL, which covers much of Sydney's western suburbs. Another, held by Apex Energy, covers Sydney's drinking water catchment, where the company hopes to drill between 150 and 200 wells to supply a fifth of Sydney's gas.

The NSW Department of Trade and Investment stressed that the licence renewals did not mean drilling would start straight away, and the likely short-term outcome is an increased number of "test" wells being drilled before full-scale commercial gas production is considered.

"The renewal of exploration licences in no way moves the applicant any closer to the granting of a production lease, and certain specific site works will require further government agency assessment and approval before they can occur," the department said.

The move met with immediate condemnation from the Lock The Gate alliance, a confederacy of people opposing coal seam gas drilling.

It believes the rush of new drilling licences has "opened the floodgates" to rapid expansion by the gas industry. "This is a dark day for NSW and communities from all around the state have every right to feel they have been deceived by a government that promised the world and has delivered nothing," the group said in a statement.

At the AGL site, residents were notified of the latest drilling by a letterbox drop, but even so many people in the area were surprised.

Campbelltown Council - often divided on environmental issues - united to condemn the plan and call for a moratorium, pointing to uncertainties around water contamination issues in the company's own environmental impact assessment.

AGL said more recent assessments by independent consultants had all but ruled out cross-contamination of underground aquifers. The company said many gas wells had been drilled nearby without contaminating water.

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