

Sherry refuses to release advisory opinion on deep- water wells

Environment minister will not say what steps will be taken next on controversial issue

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- BY TERESAWRIGHT

Environment Minister Janice Sherry is refusing to release the opinion provided by her environmental advisory committee on the controversial issue of deepwater wells and would also not say what next steps will be taken. Sherry faced tough questions Wednesday in the legislature on the moratorium currently in place on the drilling of deep wells for irrigation.

Opposition MLA James Aylward asked Sherry over and over to table her advisory council's opinion on the matter, arguing their views would have a great deal of influence over the minister's final decision on whether to lift the moratorium.

"(Islanders) are asking for transparency. They are asking for all of the information that this minister supposedly is studying to make her decision," Aylward said.

"They're asking for not only the science that she refuses to have peerreviewed, they're also asking for the opinions and the advice from her environmental advisory council."

The issue has sparked intense public interest and heated debate over water use in Prince Edward Island.

It has polarized environmental advocates and the agricultural community over the question of whether P. E. I. has enough groundwater to support industrial irrigation of potato crops.

Sherry was evasive in her answers during question period Wednesday, but later told reporters definitively she will not tell Islanders how her advisory council advised her on the question of whether to lift the moratorium on high-capacity wells.

"I'm not prepared to release the opinions of my advisory council," she said. Sherry explained she merely asked her council members for their individual views, using them as a sounding board after she was first approached on the issue.

Their views were never meant to be part of any official opinion report released to the public.

“I just wanted to get a view from the members of my advisory council just to kind of judge what those eight people might say,” Sherry said.

“Those opinions told me that they had very strong opinions on it.”

According to the P. E. I. Potato Board’s January/ February publication, the Potato News, the issue was first raised in the fall of 2012, when the board made a presentation to Sherry and to Agriculture Minister George Webster asking for the moratorium to be lifted for supplemental irrigation of their potato crops.

The board publication says it received multiple assurances it would get what it was asking for.

“Over the next year, the board was told numerous times by the Department of Environment that studies had been done showing that there as a plentiful supply of groundwater on P. E. I. with a very high recharge rate and that the moratorium would be lifted soon,” states the Potato Board publication.

“This announcement was never forthcoming and the issue has definitely come into prominence in local media in 2014.”

Sherry said Wednesday neither she nor cabinet have yet come to a decision on the matter, nor has her department even determined how it will further proceed.

The Standing Committee on Agriculture, Environment, Energy and Forestry, which held heavily attended public hearings on the issue, has recommended the moratorium remain in place while the issue continues to be explored.

It also strongly recommended government develop a water act to regulate and protect P. E. I.’ s groundwater.

Sherry says she will wait until the legislature closes and then will decide how best to proceed.

“I think that we really need to sit down and look at (the standing committee report) and decide where to go from here,” Sherry said.

“When we know where to go from here, Islanders will be involved in knowing exactly what our next steps are.”

The Potato Board and Cavendish Farms were actively lobbying MLAs earlier this year in the hopes of having the moratorium lifted in time for this growing season.

Sherry said, given the fact planting has already begun, that is out of the question for this season.