

West Newton well site

The role of the Environment Agency

October 2014

Our aim is to protect and improve the environment so that everyone can enjoy the benefits of a clean, safe and healthy place to live, work and play.

We issue environmental permits that set standards for those carrying out oil and gas exploration. The operator must comply with these permits in order to minimise their impact on the environment and the local community.

Background

A company known as Rathlin Energy has drilled an exploratory well at West Newton, to test for the presence of hydrocarbons. The exploration activities take place within the well between 1.4 and 3 kilometres below the ground surface. As an environmental regulator we use a selection of permits and permissions to set the conditions operators must comply with so that their activities do not adversely impact on the environment. Operators consult with us and apply for all relevant environmental permits and permissions for the activities they wish to carry out on site. All onshore oil and gas activities require environmental permits (issued under the Environmental Permitting Regulations 2010) as well as other permissions from us. We are also a statutory consultee in the planning process.

For onshore oil and gas exploration our environmental permitting regulations cover:

- protecting water resources, including groundwater (aquifers);
- appropriate treatment and disposal of mining waste;
- suitable treatment and management of any naturally occurring radioactive materials (NORM);
- The destruction, by incineration, of any waste gas from the well

What is happening at West Newton?

In April 2014 we issued permits to Rathlin Energy UK Limited for activities at the West Newton site relating to:

- waste gas
- mining waste
- NORM

We determined that a groundwater activity permit was not required for any of the exploration activities.

Over the past month, a few residents have reported occasional strong odours from the site. This should not have been occurring and we have taken action to require Rathlin to operate in a way that does not cause these odours. The smell was occurring when small quantities of gas were allowed to vent from the well rather than being burnt in the flare. This has now stopped.

If you have complained directly to us, we will be providing you with more detailed feedback.

The operator is still in the process of preparing the well to test the gas reservoir. Once the test starts the flare should operate constantly for several weeks without any significant odour. To ensure that this is the case we have required Rathlin to implement an odour management plan and to improve process controls to ensure efficient combustion. Monitoring results will be sent to Public Health England to check that any emissions do not have the potential for affecting public health. We expect the test to start in mid-October.

Please be aware that our officers have been inspecting this site and auditing the operator's systems at least once a week. We will continue to give the site a high priority as long as it remains operational.