



REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT, FORESTRY AND TOURISM

Thursday, 25 February 2021

**RESPONSE BY HON. POHAMBA SHIFETA, MINISTER OF
ENVIRONMENT, TOURISM AND TOURISM TO QUESTIONS
NO. 23(17/02/21)
RAISED
BY HON. TIMOTHEUS SHUHUMBU (PDM)**

Hon. Members of Parliament
Hon. Speaker Professor Peter Katjavivi

I thank you for the opportunity to address this august House on the detailed questions brought forward by Hon. Shihumbu on issues relating to fracking and ReconAfrica's oil and gas exploration project in Kavango East and Kavango West regions. And I equally thank Hon. Shihumbu for the questions.

Hon. Speaker,

Before I answer the questions posed by Hon. Shihumbu, permit to first give some background to this subject matter and to clarify important issues surrounding this project for the benefit of the members of this house but also the public at large. Hon. Speaker, I feel it is important to give this information as this particular project has attracted much interest both at national level and international level and it is of key relevance to the questions being posed by the Hon. Shihumbu.

The exploration that is currently taking place through ReconAfrica is based on the subsurface petroleum exploration rights granted to it by the Ministry of Mines and Energy in terms of Petroleum Exploration License (PEL) No. 73. It should be noted that this is not a production license, and the license issued to ReconAfrica does not allow it to carry out any production operations at its sites.

What the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, through the Office of the Environmental Commissioner has approved on 26th August 2019, is for the drilling of two explorational stratigraphic wells for the purpose of data gathering to understand the geology and confirm the existence of oil or gas for possible detailed oil and gas explorations. It is therefore clearly not a clearance for the company to go ahead with the fracking method as is being alleged by Hon. Shihumbu.

The exploration that is currently taking place is just one part of a standard step by step subsurface data collection process typically followed when exploring for subsurface resources. All of these various exploration steps are subjected to regulatory approvals as applicable in Namibia.

With reference to this specific case, ReconAfrica has completed its regional and local desktop studies. It is now busy with one of the two Stratigraphic

Test Wells and the next phase if so approved will be 2D Ground Seismic Surveys and then the drilling of exploration wells. For the information of Hon. Shihumbu, the company is in the process of applying for environmental clearance certificate to undertake the 2D Ground seismic surveys and consultations were undertaken both at the exploration site and here in Windhoek over recent weeks.

Only if the exploration well discovers oil and gas, the final step in the exploration process will be to determine the economics of the find and to assess the characteristics of the reservoir and to determine if the discovered oil or gas can be produced economically using either conventional or unconventional production methods. This key step in the process will require further approval from the appropriate regulatory authorities.

As alluded to by Hon. Shihumbu, fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, is the unconventional production process used to extract discovered oil or gas from sedimentary rocks that are highly compacted with poor permeability. It remains to be seen whether (a) Namibia has a commercially or economically viable oil or gas reserve at the exploration sites and (b) whether there is a compacted sedimentary reservoir rock that would require the use of an unconventional oil or gas production process such as fracking in the area.

Therefore, with due respect to Hon. Shihumbu, it is premature and confusing to discuss at this stage the risks of one unconventional type of production method that has not even been applied for yet by the company itself.

Hon. Speaker,

In response to several reports in the media, I also wish to clarify the location of this exploration. According to the Environmental Clearance Certificate approved by the Environmental Commissioner in this Ministry, the exploration activities will not cover the entire license area and will be limited to an area situated about 80 km south of the Okavango river, 40 km from the boundary of the Khaudum National Park and is more than 260 km from the Okavango Delta in Botswana. The approved two stratigraphic wells are furthermore not located in any conservancy or environmentally sensitive area. The potential footprint for this activity will only occur on the area that is not bigger than 250 x 250 meters around each well. The actual size of the wells to be drilled is about 30 x 30 centimeters.

I would also like to take this opportunity, Hon. Speaker, to caution our people, especially our political leaders, to be aware and to refrain from entertaining and spreading false information and allegations on emotive topics such as this one. This has the potential to tarnish our hard-earned image in terms of environmental conservation and serves to incite and inflame public opinion based on harmful misinformation. The Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism is entirely open and kindly approach our offices through the Environmental commissioner for any information and clarity on this and any other controversial issues so that you are correctly informed and do not contribute to the further spread of misinformation.

That being said, Hon. Speaker, allow me to respond in brief to the specific questions raised by Hon. Shihumbu:

Question 1

Do you comprehend the dangers that are associated with the hydraulic fracturing or fracking and the negative environmental impact thereafter?

Answer:

I wish to assure the Hon. Shihumbu that the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism is fully aware of the risks involved with the fracking method and the experiences of many other countries using this production method. I am furthermore confident that we have appropriate laws and capacity to deal correctly with the specific project alluded to by Hon. Shihumbu.

Question 2

Have your ministry together with Recon-Africa made consultation with the local people pertaining the drilling activities in their vicinities, if Yes, where and when was the consultation held and how did you explain the possible repercussions and danger of this undertakings?

Answer:

The requirements and processes for consultations with interested and affected parties are set out in the Environmental Management Act (2007),

Act No. 7 of 2007 and its regulations. The Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism is a regulatory authority and does not work with companies applying for environmental clearance certificate. The company undertakes the process and the Ministry, through the Office of the Environmental Commissioner, assesses the application and decides whether to grant, refuse or grant with conditions environmental clearance certificate for specific projects such as this one.

In this case, a full and detailed Environmental Impact Assessment study, with due consultations, was carried out as a requirement for the application for the Environmental Clearance Certificate (ECC). The Environmental Clearance Certificate issued to ReconAfrica for the drilling of two explorational stratigraphic wells is considered to be in accordance and in full compliance with the provisions of Environmental Management Act (EMA), Act No. 7 of 2007. The full EIA study and all relevant evidence of consultations undertaken is available from the Office of the Environmental Commissioner, including all documentation in electronic format.

The appointed Environmental Assessment Practitioner by the proponent (ReconAfrica) shares information on the project with those present and all participants are given the opportunity to provide their inputs and concerns on the specific project both orally and in writing.

I can inform you, Hon. Shihumbu, that specific consultative meetings were held in Nkurenkuru on 9th May 2019 and in Rundu on 10th May 2019 to which all members of the public were invited by way of advertisement in the national newspapers. Further evidence of consultations undertaken is included in the EIA study.

Hon. Speaker,

In fulfilment of our mandate as regulatory authority and to ensure full compliance with ECC conditions, I am happy to report that officials from various directorates (Directorates of Environmental Affairs, Forestry, and Parks and Wildlife) within the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism undertook the initial inspection to the only ReconAfrica drilling site during 17 – 20 January 2021. Our team has observed and confirmed that ReconAfrica operations are so far in full compliance with the ECC conditions and that there are no deviations from the approved environmental management plan.

The team was also informed that only 2 of the 3 approved stratigraphic wells will be drilled as part of this exploration phase. More detailed inspections to all active ReconAfrica sites are being planned in the near future.

I am also happy to report that our officials have participated in the ongoing public consultations that are being carried out by ReconAfrica as part of the preparation of EIA for the planned 2D Seismic survey which is yet to be submitted to the Office of Environmental Commissioner for considerations.

Question 3

After the hazardous fracking liquid have been pumped back into the drilling hole, how will this fracking liquid behave towards the ecosystem once enclosed or sealed into the fracking hole?

Answer:

As mentioned, this is for now still a hypothetical concern as ReconAfrica has neither decided on nor applied for the use of the fracking production method. If it so decided to apply for environmental clearance certificate for such, this matter will be further explored and handled in the Environmental Impact Assessment study.

Question 4

The release of greenhouse gasses, the natural gasses recovered by fracking consist largely of methane a greenhouse gas which is 20 times more potent than the reflection of sunlight energy that carbon dioxide causes, how many methane capturing equipment are installed at the site to capture the emission that will come from the fracking activities and what measures has your ministry employed to protect our ozone layer or environment?

Answer:

Again, if ReconAfrica decides to apply for environmental clearance certificate for the fracking method, this matter will be further explored in the Environmental Impact Assessment study. Mitigation measures for dust and air emissions are a standard requirement as is the continuous monitoring of emissions of hazardous gases such as methane.

Question 5

Can you confirm that nearly 700 different types of chemical composition agents that are used during the fracking process and can you enlighten this house what are the composition of this chemical mixtures?

Answer:

Indeed, a variety of different chemical agents are used during the fracking process and the exact composition of these agents depends on the characteristics and properties of the specific wells that are being fracked. Typically, low concentrations of chemicals are used to improve the transportation of sand, prevent the growth of bacteria, reduce mineral or chemical blockages and to avoid well corrosion.

Again, if ReconAfrica decided to use the fracking method and applies for environmental clearance for such, the chemical agents to be used in this project will be proposed and disclosed in the Environmental Impact Assessment Study. The Ministry will assess the use of these chemicals in terms of amongst others:

1. Their toxicity to humans;
2. Their toxicity to the environment;
3. Biodegradation, bioaccumulation potential and persistence;
4. Potential chemical routes and exposure pathways; and
5. Health and environmental standards.

Question 6

It is known that fracking process requires a very large consumption of fresh drinking water and Namibia is an arid and semi-arid country with little water reserves in our aquifers and sanctioning these activities may deplete our water sources, are you sacrificing Namibian lives especially those in rural areas that depends on underground water

sources over this dangerous activities or what measures will your ministry take to sustain and protect our water resources?

Answer:

Again, if ReconAfrica decided to use the fracking method and applies for environmental clearance certificate for such, the impact of the project on water consumption and water resources as well as mitigation measures in the area will be one of the parameters assessed in the Environmental Impact Assessment Study before any environmental clearance certificate is granted and issued.

It is therefore extremely careless and inappropriate to insinuate that the Ministry is sacrificing Namibian lives, especially of those in the rural areas, when we haven't even given the go-ahead for this production method to be applied. This is very much regrettable and harmful Hon. Speaker.

Question 7

Have you informed the minister of health that fracking activities will increase the ground -level ozone, a key risk factor for cancer and asthma and other respiratory illness when he is already failing to provide basic medical care to Namibians under this difficult situation of Covid-19?

Answer:

In brief Hon. Speaker, the answer to this question is no. The Minister of Health and Social Services has not yet been formally notified of this matter as it is still considered premature to do so. Consultation with the Ministry of Health and Social Services and other key Ministries will be undertaken on the risks of this project, at the appropriate time, if and when we get to that point in the process.

I thank you for your kind attention.