



Interest flares in gas search

A 2012 study estimated that the Karoo's underground rock strata contain 450-trillion cubic feet of natural gas. And the appeal court ruling on Rhino follows news in February that French energy giant Total had found a major gas field off the Mossel Bay coast

Ruling revives fears of KZN fracking

Appeal court judges overturn stay on exploration for gas

By **JEFF WICKS**

● A Supreme Court of Appeal judgment may pave the way for fracking across 5,500 farms, a vast tract of nearly 2-million hectares of arable land in northern KwaZulu-Natal.

The appellate court on Friday overturned a ruling in the Western Cape High Court that interdicted Texas-based Rhino Oil and Gas from moving ahead with aerial exploration on thousands of farms.

If the exploration is successful, the company will need further permissions to begin broadscale mining or fracking.

Rhino also has pending applications with the Petroleum Association of SA (Pasa) for exploration in the Free State and Eastern Cape. The appeal court ruling applies only to exploration in KwaZulu-Natal, however.

The firm's bid to conduct geological surveys to find subterranean gas reserves was stopped short in 2017 when Normandien Farms, a company which owns several farms

that may rest on fuel reserves, went to court to challenge technical irregularities in Rhino's application process with Pasa.

The affected landowners, Normandien held, had not been properly consulted as part of the applications for exploration.

In notices and public meetings, Rhino seemed to stray from the prospect of fracking, saying it was "not envisaged".

Normandien claimed that if Rhino was granted a licence to extract gas, it would likely use fracking as it was the easiest method to get access to the underground gas pockets it may find.

Fracking involves drilling to release a combination of water, sand and chemicals into rock at high pressure, unlocking shale gas deposits.

The environmental impact of the process is contentious, with experts warning of possible groundwater contamination by chemicals. There are also concerns about the huge amount of water required for the process.

Normandien attacked Pasa's failure to follow its own rules and regulations, and on a technicality had the process halted, arguing that if the "irregular" process continued the farms might be affected.

However, the Supreme Court of Appeal found that the lower court had no basis to stop the application process because Nor-



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mandien had suffered no prejudice. It set aside the interdict and dismissed Normandien's original application.

"Normandien has approached the court before any decision, according to it, has even been taken, and before it had suffered any prejudice on account of the actions complained of," the judgment reads.

"It launched a pre-emptive strike against Rhino. It may perhaps have been best advised to 'husband its powder' in anticipation of the battle that may or may not lie ahead."

Repeated efforts to reach Rhino Oil and Gas CEO Phillip Steyn were unsuccessful.

Judy Bell, an environmentalist at lobby group FrackFree SA, described the judgment as a devastating harbinger.

"This is not only about the devastation fracking will cause, but about the wellbeing of the planet entirely," she said.

"Fracking uses massive amounts of water, which is a commodity we don't have in abundant supply. Over and above that the existing supply stands to be polluted by the process."

Bobby Peak of groundWork said the non-profit organisation would vehemently oppose any form of fracking.

"We will always resist this process in whatever way we can. We'll do this by changing public opinion and making sure

the public understands fracking is not something we need in terms of the environmental impact and the effect on the health of people on the ground," he said.

Environmental activist and writer Bronwyn Howard, of Utrecht in northern KwaZulu-Natal, said Rhino had a number of other applications in the province and elsewhere, which included areas of the Drakensberg, Golden Gate Highlands National Park and areas surrounding the Vaal.

"Whether they use fracking or conventional drilling, there can be a significant impact on the water and in this area, we are part of a catchment area of major rivers in the province. This is a water system that supplies millions of people," she said.

However, economist Mike Schussler said the discovery of gas reserves would augur well for SA's financial standing and could provide an answer to electricity woes.

"Any discovery of gas would have a positive impact on our chequebook with the rest of the world, in terms of what we buy and sell. Also, gas-fired power stations are far more environmentally friendly than coal."

"The environmentalists need to look at the positive side of the picture, too, and it makes a difference to the wellbeing of SA as a whole," he said.