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Law and Order in the Oil & Gas Fields Report

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February 2, 2005

WORC, or the Western Organization of Resource Councils, has recently completed an important report called Law and Order in the Oil and Gas Fields that reviews gas drilling inspection and enforcement programs in five western states. WORC and its member groups believe strongly in corporate responsibility, fairness, stewardship of the land, accountability, public health and clean air and water.

We believe those values are endangered by oil and gas operations across the west that are growing at significant rates. Citizens in Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming, Montana and North Dakota are experiencing the “gas rush,” which in addition to bringing prosperity has also wreaked havoc on public and private lands. The report’s findings document that state and federal agency inspection and enforcement staff levels have NOT kept pace with the rapid expansion of industry.

This report has important findings for:

- the residents of areas impacted by oil and gas development
- government decision makers
- public employees who are responsible for implementing inspection and enforcement programs, and
- the members of the WORC network.

Our goal in producing this report is to safeguard the quality of life and natural environment – which go hand in hand – by strengthening the enforcement of oil and gas laws and regulations. The levels of staffing for enforcement and existing accountability mechanisms are inadequate and outdated for an industry that is rapidly expanding across the landscape of the West.

Law and Order in the Oil and Gas Fields documents several key findings:

- Active oil and gas wells are not inspected often enough – with BLM inspections taking place on average every 2-10 years and state inspections averaging only once every 1-3 years.
- 79% of active wells are located in the six BLM field offices studied in the report, while these six offices employ only 26% of all BLM inspectors.
- BLM environmental compliance inspectors spend an average of only 15% of their time on inspection and enforcement activities even though production is booming.
- Agencies take too few enforcement actions, even when problems are identified.
- Citizen complaints are often ignored.

The report makes concrete recommendations that state and federal officials can use to strengthen their inspection and enforcement programs, including seven primary recommendations:

1. The BLM and state agencies should beef up inspection programs and enforce existing laws to protect landowners, natural resources, and public health.
2. The system is grossly understaffed, and more inspectors must be added.
3. Existing rules need to be enforced.
4. Fines and penalties for irresponsible drilling must be levied at high enough levels to impact industry behavior.
5. The BLM and state agencies should shut down operators that consistently break the rules as well as deny new permits to drill.
6. The public needs to be treated as a critical ally, and given the information and opportunity to participate in industry oversight.
7. Citizens should be encouraged to report complaints, and any complaints need to be documented, thoroughly investigated and resolved.

We believe the information in this report will help people who are directly impacted to hold industry and the government accountable for their lack of response to human health and environmental safety issues. Implementation of quality inspection programs coupled with meaningful fines will provide an incentive for industry to voluntarily comply with the law.

Oil and natural gas are important commodities for our nation, but balancing development with public health and environmental needs must become an equal part of the drilling equation. Our intention is to improve the system so everyone benefits.

Finally, the report will be distributed in each state to public policy decision makers.