

Report Finds Need to Strengthen State and Federal Oil and Gas Programs

Programs Often Fail to Protect People, Land, and Resources Report Reviews Programs of Five Western States

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Billings, Mont. - A report released today by WORC (the Western Organization of Resource Councils) calls on federal and state agencies to balance booming oil and gas development with public health and environmental safety by strengthening inspection and enforcement programs.

The report, *Law and Order in the Oil and Gas Fields*, reviews oil and gas programs in Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Wyoming. The report provides information on oil and gas drilling, permitting, and inspection and enforcement activities over the past five years.

“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,” said Peggy Utesch, WORC spokesperson and member of the Western Colorado Congress. Utesch, a writer and graphic designer from Silt, Colo., lives within a half-mile of 25 gas wells.

“Our intention is to improve the system so everyone benefits,” Utesch said. “The report’s findings document that agency enforcement staff levels have not kept pace with the rapid expansion of oil and gas development.”

Other key findings are:

- Oil and gas wells and associated facilities are not inspected often enough;
- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) environmental compliance inspectors spend too much time on other activities;
- Agencies take too few enforcement actions; and
- Citizen complaints are often ignored.

Utesch said Garfield County, Colorado, now has about 2,000 wells with a potential for another 17,000 wells in the next 10 years.

“At current levels, the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission (COGCC) inspectors should inspect about three wells daily all year long, but that isn’t happening,” she said. “What will happen when we have 10 times this many wells?”

Utesch cited lack of staff and oversight from both the BLM and COGCC inspectors.

“We are in a situation where watchful and concerned residents are reporting accidents and violations because there are only two state inspectors for the 20 counties of Colorado’s Western Slope,” she said.

Utesch said that federal and state agencies should hire more inspectors and that the COGCC should make fines large enough to correct industry’s bad behavior.

Utesch said the report provides recommendations to the BLM and state agencies that would improve inspection and enforcement and better protect people, land and resources, including clean air and water. The report urges the BLM and state agencies to beef up inspection programs and enforce laws protecting landowners and natural resources by:

- Doing more inspections and adding more inspectors;
- Enforcing the rules;
- Imposing fines and penalties for irresponsible drilling; and
- Shutting down operations that consistently break the rules and not letting them drill new wells.

“We believe the information in this report will help affected people to hold industry and the government accountable for its lack of response to human health and environmental safety issues,” Utesch said.

WORC is a network of grassroots organizations representing farmers, ranchers, and consumers in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

The report and a summary are available on WORC’s website, www.worc.org. The website also provides statements by the following spokespersons from states surveyed in the report: Peggy Utesch, WORC and Western Colorado Congress; Donald Nelson, Dakota Resource Council; Clint McRae, Northern Plains Resource Council; Oscar Simpson, New Mexico Wildlife Federation; and Nancy Sorenson, Powder River Basin Resource Council.