

## Clamp down on unchecked waste of public resources

By Gwen Lachelt Guest Commentary

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*Gas vapors burn off and oil and gas rigs in Weld County near Kersey. (RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post)*

Colorado has yet again shown national energy leadership with our high air quality and natural gas capture standards for the oil and gas industry. Yet these rules don't apply to development on our public lands, allowing for the unchecked waste of public resources. That threatens the effectiveness of Colorado's standards.

This is not a small problem. According to a Western Values Project report, oil and gas companies leaked, vented and burned enough gas on public lands in 2013 to meet the needs of a population the size of Los Angeles for a year. To top it off, these same companies are avoiding paying taxes on the gas they are wasting.

Venting and flaring is so wasteful that it is hard for some people I talk with to believe that oil and gas companies would simply waste natural gas they could be selling at a profit. But as natural gas prices have fallen, operators have shifted to drilling mainly for oil, which has been more profitable. Natural gas still comes up with the oil, and rather than investing in the infrastructure to capture it, many drillers are choosing to simply vent it or flare it, which means burning it up on site. And at the moment, no one is looking out for American taxpayers, landowners, and families who are paying for their wasteful behavior.

While a recent proposal by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) — endorsed by The Denver Post — is a critical first step toward following Colorado's lead and addressing this problem, it doesn't go the full distance. That is why so many westerners have joined me in calling on the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to move forward its rules addressing this incredibly wasteful practice on the public lands that belong to all Americans.

The EPA rule is critical, but it only applies to new wells, not existing ones. BLM's standards will ensure that existing waste and pollution from development on public lands — like the kind that has led to a Delaware-size plume of methane (or natural gas) over the Four Corners region where I live — is adequately addressed. It will furthermore ensure the taxpayer, and our state and local shares of energy royalties, are not shortchanged.

It's simply not right that we pay the consequences when companies increase pollution and waste our natural gas, only to leave us less and less able to address those consequences through the revenue that should come with development. For regions like mine, we watch a major revenue source literally burned off into the atmosphere with every flame we see on a well-pad, cutting public revenues by millions.

Put simply, we are wasting American energy and local resources for absolutely no benefit.

American taxpayers own the resources on and under our federal lands, and we deserve better. We should not allow our natural gas to be burned and wasted while we pay more and more for the natural gas we need in our homes during harsh winters. According to the WVP report, Colorado has lost out on over \$35 million since 2009 because companies have the right to simply burn off our natural gas without paying for it.

Communities all over the American West are facing the same challenges as the Four Corners and we are

in need of real results from Washington. The United States stands to lose over \$800 million over the next 10 years, and the Government Accountability Office has identified flaring and venting as a priority area for policy change.

Westerners of all stripes are calling on BLM to act. Our leaders must take action with a strong rule on natural gas venting and flaring to save taxpayers, landowners, and families from the devastating consequences of this wasteful practice.

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