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Impacts of CBM Development on Communities

Gwen Lachelt

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surface owners for damages to their property incurred by drilling operations. All of those have been defeated.

Now, I will say that things have improved since 1991. We have better operators down there, we have better relations than we did back then, but there is still a lot of work to be done. And I will credit a lot of that to what we have done locally. It is very difficult to fight a fight when you're 300 miles away from the battleground.

IMPACTS OF CBM DEVELOPMENT ON COMMUNITIES

GWEN LACHELT, *Oil and Gas Accountability Project*

I am with the Oil and Gas Accountability project, and our mission is to work with communities throughout the Rocky Mountain West and throughout the country to reduce the problems caused by oil and gas development. We've worked on oil and gas issues now since 1988, when Amoco, now BP, I believe, announced plans to build 1,000 coalbed methane wells on the south side of the Powder River Basin. I'd like to state up front that I'm not an attorney. I'm not a geologist or petroleum engineer or land use expert. My experience comes from working directly with people who are directly affected by coalbed methane development in particular, oil and gas issues in general. I've been working at the local, state, and national levels since '88 through various reform initiatives. And I'm going to focus my communication both on the physical impacts on the environment and the effect this impact has had on people and families. Certainly, there are economic benefits, as Bob Zahradnik stated earlier, but I'm going to leave that discussion to those folks.

This is where coalbed methane development is occurring right now. [The 35mm slides shown at the conference are not available here]. If you take a look at this map, you can see where the reserves of coalbed methane are. And actually, there have probably been additional reserves discovered since this map was produced. The San Juan Basin is in the southwestern portion of Colorado, with the majority of it being in New Mexico. We believe that coalbed methane development poses a serious environmental threat to the Rocky Mountain West. Regions of Colorado and New Mexico and Wyoming have been serving as America's guinea pig, you if you will, from the development of coalbed

methane. As you've heard in other presentations, massive amounts of ground water must be pumped from underground aquifers. Coal seams are to simulate production in a web of roads, constructed to deliver the product to market. Let's go into the San Juan Basin.

Thank you very much.

It is much easier to level the playing field at home, in our effort to get fair treatment for surface owners as the development of resources continues. That is what we are trying to do. And that is where La Plata County has had our successes. And that is where we will continue to make sure that our people have a voice in the future of their community.

Thousands of coalbed methane wells have been drilled and have profoundly altered our landscape. In coalbed methane wells, the density is every 160 acres. As new regions across the west begin to experience coalbed methane development, tribal groups are pointing to the San Juan Basin and saying that they don't want their communities to be nightmare stories of being able to light their tapwater on fire from methane contamination, caused by the dewatering of the coal formation. Stories like these haunt residents in these regions that are looking at potential coalbed methane development. Reports of methane contamination and new methane seeps continue to be reported in the county in toxic levels. Toxic levels of hydrogen sulfide have driven some families their homes. Several residents' homes have become uninhabitable from these contaminations. And torn-down homes are now commonplace, especially in areas where the coal seams outcrop at the surface. Companies have received state and federal approval to double the density of allowable wells in the San Juan Basin.

Just to give you some idea, here is a pit for oil and gas waste during drilling. Here is a smoking drilling rig near a home. Pretty typical drilling tower. And as you can see here, a single well can punch miles of road into the middle of undisturbed land, destroying wildlife habitat in the area. Drilling and completion is a really loud and smelly process. A bright and intensely lit drilling rig and

crew works about 24 hours a day for weeks on end. Trucks and heavy equipment come and go constantly, and many families are literally driven from their homes during the drilling period. Here's a truck. This is a good example of a hydraulic fracturing operation.

This is a stimulation technique that they use to get oil and gas out faster. Hydraulics is one technique. Fluids are injected under the seams to create new fractures for the gas to escape through. Injection is another technique where explosives are detonated underground for hazardous chemicals to get into ground water. This is a production waste pit. And if you're unaware, a number of exploration—I mean, in general, exploration and production waste are exempt from regulation under the nation's waste law. This is a sign near the Animas river in town near one of our new middle schools where hydrogen sulfide is seeping into the river.

In full-field development, this is a picture of the area I mentioned previously in Colorado's Grand. . . . Here's some collector pipelines. Once you hit full-field development, you just, you have collector pipelines, compressors, dehydrators; in central facilities, transport pipelines. And these—this is a development that turns previously rural areas literally into industrial zones. This still doesn't mean that oil and gas shouldn't happen, but with all these impacts, it certainly means the oil and gas industry needs to go back to the drawing board and figure out how to do that. This type of development is not appropriate where it has a negative affect on people, water, air, land, and wildlife. With this lack of information, it makes sense for companies to fully disclose the impacts before proceeding.

The impacts on families who live in rural subdivisions and ranches has been tremendous. Many report sleepless nights and concern for their health and also the loss of quality of life due to constant noise from nearby facilities and constantly having the oil and gas industry on their land on a fairly frequent basis. One man I know, who developed cancer, is very suspicious of the water he drank from his tap after a nearby fracturing association. He called one day a couple of years ago and reported that his water had actually turned black after a hydraulic fracturing investigation. Many are concerned for the safety of their children on roads with very heavy truck traffic and unfenced well sites with with jacks and toxic pits. Many are concerned with their property values. For many, our

home is our largest investment. A lot of these people want to sell their homes to move out of the gas patch, and they're fearful that their homes won't be sold because of nearby gas and oil drilling. And then there's the ranchers. Many fear that coalbed methane development will force them off the land and finally—and this is not an exhaustive list—but people are growing increasingly frustrated at the lack of response they receive from state and federal agencies.

Many simply feel shut out in public decision making processes. As pressure to drill is at any cost, decisions are made that directly affect our lives and the public lands that we hold so dearly. Some people who have decided to speak out have actually been faced with various sorts of SLAPP suits from oil and gas companies and federal agencies that are trying to squelch their voices. So there's been many, many impacts; not just to the land, but to people who are just trying to live normal lives. And just one more note: A rancher that we work with on the New Mexico side is losing about eight to ten cattle a year from drinking out of toxic pits that are unfenced at well sites. And one of our battle cries has been to talk about the fact that coalbed methane is not a clean fuel. And as we struggle to meet America's energy demands and reduce air pollution, coalbed methane is constantly being promoted by the oil and gas industry as a clean alternative fuel.

At a worldwide oil and gas symposium two years ago in Denver, speakers announced plans for accelerated development of this so-called environmentally friendly fuel that would offer tax credits for coalbed methane development and roll back environmental safeguards to pave the way for increased oil and gas development on public, private, and tribal lands throughout the country.

As stated in the 1993 Greenpeace report, and I quote, "nonpolluted fuel is either to minimize or completely ignore its total fuel cycle impacts, beginning with initial size of its surveys, drilling production, processing, and distribution, all the way through to the final combustion process." Protecting areas is a priority for my organization and many of the community organizations that are represented in this room today. And we believe that there's just simply a whole lot at stake.

Thanks.