Oil, Gas Drilling Rile West's Energy Embrace

KRISTEN WYATT,Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — This used to be a land proud of its oil barons. Now the energy industry that has brought wealth and jobs across the interior West is prompting angry protests by citizens sporting gas masks and using bullhorns at public hearings.

A generation after the fictional oil tycoons of the TV soap "Dynasty" gave Denver's oil and gas industry a glamorous sheen, the Rocky Mountain region appears to be questioning its romance with the industry. New drilling technology has moved oil and gas production from the sparsely populated plains, where oil rigs are embraced as job creators, closer to cities and suburbs. Now, conflicts are increasing along the populous eastern fringe of the Rockies.

Gas-mask-wearing protesters are confronting city and county officials considering whether to limit or ban hydraulic fracturing, a drilling procedure in which water, sand and chemicals are forced deep underground to pry oil and gas from rock. Fracking, as the procedure is called, has led to an energy boom in areas previously unattractive to energy producers, but it is also raising concerns about air and water

quality.

The protests in Colorado have gotten intense. At hearings across the state, shouting opponents harass oil and gas representatives. Even Colorado's governor, a Democrat and former geologist who says fracking is safe, has been mobbed by protesters. Leaving a suburban Denver meeting about drilling earlier this fall, Gov. John Hickenlooper ducked into an SUV and pulled away as a crowd of protesters, some of them children, chanted, "Dirty water, dirty air, we get sick and you don't care!"

Opposition to fracking has also surfaced in Idaho, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has probed whether the procedure may be responsible for groundwater contamination near the Wyoming town of Pavillion. State officials and others have disputed that claim.

The West's anti-fracking movement hit a watershed moment in a Denver suburb in this year's elections. Longmont, a town of about 85,000 located 30 miles from Denver, voted overwhelmingly to buck state law and prohibit fracking in the city, setting up a legal showdown over whether individual communities can challenge the powerful Colorado Oil & Gas Conservation Commission, which regulates the industry statewide.

The vote inspired other fracking opponents from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs — and underscores the energy industry's challenge as it looks to expand into new production areas.

"It's the classic case ... of where you stand depends on where you sit," said David Kennedy, head of the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University. "The historic battle in the West has been the cities and the farmers. Now it's the cities, farmers and the frackers, all battling for water."

The battle is one fracking opponents say they can win, despite a legacy of pro-drilling policies across the state and region.

"We're an oil and gas state. We know that. We're going up against a huge industry," said Neshama Abraham, a freelance writer in Boulder who has helped lead fracking opposition in her county. "This is tremendously dangerous technology that is at our front door."

The "fracktivists" are making noise even in heavily Republican areas. At a recent city council meeting in Colorado Springs, fracking protesters waved signs warning of environmental destruction while passing drivers honked their support. "You can't drink oil," read one poster.

"I think Longmont gave people hope that it is possible to take on this industry," said Laurel Biedermann, a fracking skeptic in Colorado Springs. "We don't have to bend over and be a doormat for this industry."

The Colorado Springs council has postponed a final vote on drilling regulations. In Fort Collins, city officials put a six-month moratorium on fracking after a public hearing in which residents sought the delay.

Fracking proponent Justin Williams, owner of Colorado-based Lone Star Energy, argued at the Colorado Springs council meeting that cities are foolish to try to stop the procedure. Fracking is necessary, he said, because of the nation's energy appetite.

"This demand is unquenchable. If we don't produce it here, it'll be done in countries employing 15-year-olds to do it," Williams said.

Another drilling supporter decried what he calls a "mob mentality" by anti-fracking activists. Former Colorado Springs councilman Sean Paige, now with Colorado's chapter of the right-leaning Americans For Prosperity, said he's disheartened by the new intense tone from opponents. Paige wrote a letter to Colorado governor's calling for more civility after recent boisterous protests.

"There's more conflict," he said, "than ever before."

The dispute will soon shift to the Colorado Capitol, where lawmakers have tried and failed to ease drilling disputes.

During the last legislative session that ended in May, the fracking debate broke down completely. Some Democrats proposed bills to add new environmental requirements for the industry, or to give towns more say over drilling regulations. Republicans countered with proposals that would have stripped any town that banned the drilling procedure of certain tax benefits.

Ultimately Colorado's Democratic Senate and Republican House agreed on nothing related to drilling.

The session that begins next month could be different. With both chambers under Democratic control, fracking limits are likely to be debated again.

"People don't want an industrial process going right across their fence," said Rep. Max Tyler, a Democrat from Denver's western suburbs who will lead a House committee likely to consider drilling regulations next year. "We'll definitely be talking about this."

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