

Fracking Transforms Fortunes, Land

BRENNAN LINSLEY, Associated Press

RIFLE, Colo. (AP) — Three hours west of Denver, across the Continental Divide, the Rocky Mountains begin the long transition into high desert plateaus.



In this March 29, 2013 photo, a worker checks a dipstick to check water levels and temperatures in a series of tanks at an Encana Oil & Gas (USA) Inc. hydraulic fracturing operation at a gas drilling site outside Rifle, Colorado. Hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," can greatly increase the productivity of an oil or gas well by splitting open rock with water, fine sand and lubricants pumped underground at high pressure. Companies typically need several million gallons of water to frack a single well. In western Colorado, Encana says it recycles over 85 percent of the water it uses for fracking to save money and limit use of local water supplies. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

This sparsely-populated land is dotted with ranches and small towns that were once local hubs for mining the rich minerals found under the earth.

But over the past few years, this town and others have become increasingly a local center for the hydraulic fracturing industry. Off the highway outside town in all directions, one can see evidence, large and small, of the latest local energy boom, from natural gas extraction all the way up the chain to refining.

Hydraulic fracturing — "fracking," for short — pumps millions of gallons of water mixed with fine sand and chemicals deep into oil and gas wells.

The water splits open oil- and gas-bearing rock. Specially formulated fracking fluids help carry the sand into the newly formed fissures and keep the cracks propped open.

The rapid growth of the oil industry in the region has brought opposition from those who warn of environmental costs. Fracking can release hydrocarbons into groundwater and the chemically tainted water can cause air pollution, they say.

Industry officials say a dearth of documented contamination out of 1 million fracking jobs in the U.S. since the 1940s proves the process is safe.

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