

Oil Patch residents want voice in legislation

Residents in the epicenter of North Dakota's oil development spoke about the impacts Saturday during the Dakota Resource Council's annual meeting in Bismarck.

By: **Amy Dalrymple**, Forum Communications



Brenda Jorgenson, center, a farmer and rancher near White Earth, N.D., speaks on a panel about impacts of oil development during the Dakota Resource Council's annual meeting Saturday in Bismarck. Cedar Gillette, left, of New Town, N.D., and Donny Nelson, right, who farms and ranches near Keene, N.D., also were panelists. Amy Dalrymple/Forum Communications

BISMARCK – Brenda Jorgenson wasn't used to being a public speaker or environmental advocate.

But the third-generation farmer and rancher near White Earth, N.D., is becoming one as she works to prevent oil development from harming the White Earth Valley for future generations.

"I've learned that I have to because I feel that I've been called to be a steward of the land that we've been privileged to farm and ranch," she said.

Jorgenson and two other residents in the epicenter of North Dakota's oil development spoke about the impacts Saturday during the Dakota Resource Council's annual meeting in Bismarck.

During the meeting, themed "Build a Better Bakken," members passed a resolution to work with legislators to direct at least 40 percent of local oil tax revenue back to the impacted communities.

Members also plan to support legislation directing a minimum of \$10 million from the Resources Trust Fund for programs that support energy efficiency, energy assistance and renewable energy.

Residents of the oil-impacted communities need to be heard during the legislative session, said panelist Cedar Gillette, a New Town, N.D., resident.

"We need a voice and we need a voice in legislation," Gillette said. "Everything is not 'Rocking the Bakken.'"

Donny Nelson, a farmer and rancher near Keene, N.D., said his greatest concern is the millions of gallons of water being taken out of aquifers for hydraulic fracturing.

“I don’t think we have the right to use that water like that,” Nelson said. “The future generations are going to be the ones that suffer.”

Nelson also raised concerns about flaring of natural gas, and several in attendance said the North Dakota Industrial Commission should do more to restrict flaring and stop wasting the natural resource.

Jorgenson, who has an oil well 800 feet from her home, said the flare is noisy.

“Some days it sounds like a jet engine right outside,” she said.

But it’s even worse when the flare goes out because “we get terrible smells and it infiltrates the house, the yard,” Jorgenson said.

Gillette said residents of the Fort Berthold Reservation are “trampled” by oil impacts like housing shortages, cost of living increases, dangerous truck traffic and increased crime.

“Our sense of public safety is gone. We don’t know who’s around us,” Gillette said. “It just feels like we’re surrounded by this chaos and we don’t know what’s going on.”

Residents are so overwhelmed by the everyday impacts that it’s difficult for them to attend public hearings or educate themselves on environmental issues, Gillette said. Agencies should notify the public about hearings and put the information in plain language, “not just so a scientist can read it,” Gillette said.

Jorgenson said it’s difficult to find out about hearings to approve permits related to oil and gas development.

“For a person to object, how do you know?” Jorgenson said. “I can’t believe the rigmarole it takes to try to find that out.”

Dalrymple is a Forum Communications Co. reporter stationed in the Oil Patch. She can be reached at adalrymple@forumcomm.com or (701) 580-6890.