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Rural ND farmers push for greater distance between oil wells, houses

By: [Amy Dalrymple](#), The Dickinson Press

KEENE — Frank and Wanda Leppell already have three oil wells one-quarter mile from their front picture window. They don't want wells any closer.

“That's the view we're going to have for the rest of our lives,” said Frank, who watched the wells get drilled from his living room.



The McKenzie County farmers and ranchers are pushing for new legislation that would require oil wells to be located 1,000 feet away from homes instead of the current setback of 500 feet.

“We decided enough's enough,” Wanda said. “Just give us some breathing room and we'll give you (the oil industry) some breathing room.”

The lifelong western North Dakota residents say they're not opposed to oil development, but they worry about the possibility of a fire or a spill close to their home and they're concerned about the safety of their grandchildren when they visit.

But opponents of increasing the setback — which is proposed in two similar bills — say it would have unintended consequences that could negatively affect landowners.

The House Energy and Natural Resources Committee will hold a hearing today on House Bill 1348, which would increase the setback requirement to 1,320 feet, or one-fourth of a mile.

Lynn Helms, director of the Department of Mineral Resources, is expected to testify in opposition to that bill. Helms told members of the North Dakota Industrial Commission last week that the state has worked hard to get oil wells in east-west corridors and increasing the setback would have negative consequences for pipeline networks.

The Leppells were among Bakken landowners who testified last week in favor of Senate Bill 2206, which the couple worked with Sen. Bill Bowman, R-Bowman, to introduce. They own 30 acres and lease about 4,000 acres of cropland and pasture about 25 miles northeast of Watford City.

The couple estimates that 21 oil wells are either staked or permitted within two miles of their home, with some wells staked within 700 or 800 feet of their home. Wanda points out that the setback requirement is the distance from “occupied dwellings,” not their property line.

“We moved out here to be alone,” said Frank, who has worked in the oil industry. “We didn't move out here to have company.”

Ron Ness, president of the North Dakota Petroleum Council, testified last week against the Leppells' proposal and said it would have negative environmental consequences, according to his written testimony.

Increasing the setbacks would reduce the flexibility in deciding the best location of a well and would discourage the centralized placement of facilities, Ness said. It also would result in longer drilling time, increased truck traffic, decrease in wildlife habitat and open space and loss of farmland, he said.

The setbacks were increased from 350 feet to 500 feet in 2006, Ness said.

Several other oil-related bills also will have hearings today during the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee meeting, including a bill related to surface owner protection and reclamation and mediation of mineral developer and surface owner disputes.

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