

Dumping opponents gather in New Town

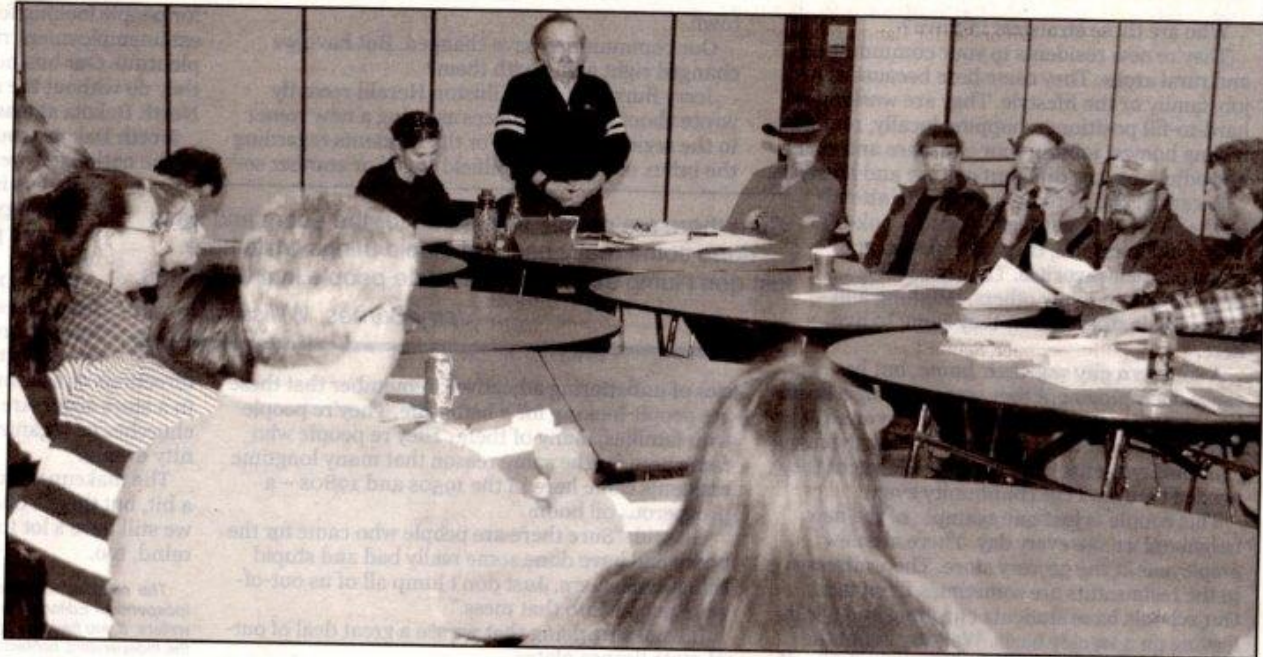
By JERRY W. KRAM 4/18/13
BHG News Service

The oil boom that started in 2006 has brought many things to western North Dakota. It has brought people to towns that were fading away and money into an economy that was barely holding its own. But this growth has also brought challenges of its own as the influx of people strains housing, roads, law enforcement and public infrastructure to the limit.

One of those challenges is that people, business and the oil industry itself generates a lot of waste, and that waste has to go somewhere. Of particular concern to a group of about 35 activists that gathered in New Town on Saturday is the material that is brought up from thousands of feet underground in the drilling and fracking process.

Former journalist Darrell Dorgan chaired the meeting of what is tentatively called the North Dakota Energy Industry Waste Coalition. The coalition, which is still in the process of being organized, brings together concerned citizens from across western North Dakota, including Washburn, Underwood, Killdeer, New Town, Parshall, White Shield, Stanley, Dickinson, Bismarck and the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.

Dorgan said one thing the diverse group had in common was a concern about Naturally Occurring Radioactive Material, or NORM. North Dakota has unusually high levels of NORM, which is why radon testing is suggested for homes in the state. NORM is even more concentrated in the thousands of feet of rock that make up the Williston Basin, including the oil-rich Bakken Formation. Some of the material brought up during the drilling process exceeds the state standard for disposal in regular landfills, which is 5



Activists from Stanley to Underwood to Standing Rock gathered in New Town to discuss the proliferation of hazardous waste and waste disposal sites in western North Dakota. Former journalist Darrell Dorgan led the discussion, which included concerns about radioactive oil field waste and proposed and existing waste sites around Mandaree, White Shield and Underwood.

Jerry W. Kram/BHG News Service

picocuries.

"We've had material rejected every day from the Williston and Watford City landfills for exceeding that standard," Dorgan said. "We've asked the State Health Department where that material goes after a landfill rejects it, and they say, 'We don't know.' State law says anything above 5 picocuries has to go to an authorized, licensed dump site. The Health Department says they can't keep track of it because it is really expensive. That's not my problem, that's their problem. This is what the law says they are supposed to do. If it is getting dumped in North Dakota, the Health Department better figure out where it is getting dumped."

Fort Berthold residents Vance Gillette and Theodora Bird Bear spoke to the group about finding potentially radioactive filters that should have gone to certified landfills thrown away in commercial dumpsters or on the side of the road, and also about a controversial oilfield waste site near White Shield that was initially approved then blocked by the Three Affiliated Tribes.

Dennis and Betty Kost of Washburn and Eugene Wirtz of Underwood talked about waste disposal site being developed in McLean County. The former coal mine was converted into a landfill that was licensed to dispose of fly ash from power plants. However,

Wirtz said, area power companies have found a market to sell fly ash. So the owners of the site are in the process of getting a license to handle "special" waste, which he said was a term that included low level radioactive material like NORM.

Dorgan and Don Morrison of the Dakota Resource Council, gave an update about waste issues in the North Dakota Legislature.

Dorgan said New Town was chosen as a meeting site because New Town people attended the coalition's organizing meeting in Bismarck last month. He said the group is planning meetings across western North Dakota over the next several months to

bring together people who want responsible management of oil-field waste.

"The group is only about six weeks old," Dorgan said. "We have to move fast because I think the North Dakota Health Department is going to change the rules about the disposal of radioactive waste quickly. Originally we thought it was going to happen the end of next year, but I am getting the impression that it is going to happen much quicker than that. People in North Dakota deserve input on that. The oil industry is certainly been providing consultants to the Health Department."

The group is planning to meet again in May in Minot.