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[Rural residents make a plea for greater well setbacks from homes](#)

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By Steve Andrist

Kristen Mesker grew increasingly emotional as she told seven North Dakota senators that her worst fears about oil development are coming true.

“There will be no future here for our kids,” said the Powers Lake area farmer and rancher, wiping away tears as she testified before the Senate Natural Resources Committee about life among the wells.

“I see trucking in water for us and for our cattle because ours is contaminated,” she said.

“Having land we can’t graze due to salt water spills or fracking chemicals, sick cattle we can’t sell, and health problems with our children.”

Mesker advanced an argument for requiring oil wells to be located at least 1,000 feet from occupied dwellings.

“With this activity there is an increase in problems such as oil spills, salt water spills, H₂S, water contamination, health hazards and increased dust from truck traffic,” she said.

“Having all this 500 feet from your home is too close.”

But 500 feet is the standard in the bill that was debated before the committee Thursday. The original bill, introduced by Rep. Glen Froseth, R-Kenmare, declared that wells must be 1,320 feet from homes.

It was amended in the house to leave that distance the same as current law, which specifies 500 feet, but requires equipment including flares, tanks and treaters, to be located further away from the home. The amended bill is a compromise between landowner groups and the North Dakota Petroleum Council.

“We still feel 500 feet is too close to an occupied dwelling,” said Myron Hanson of Souris, president of the Northwest Landowners Association, but unlikely to win that concession, “the question became how do we address this issue and still provide some relief?”

The answer turned out to be moving the equipment to the side of the well site opposite of the occupied home.

“It’s not the well bore that’s the problem,” Hanson said, “but the equipment associated with it.”

Ron Ness, president of the North Dakota Petroleum Council, voiced agreement with the amended bill, which earlier passed the full house by a vote of 91-0.

Part of the issue is that increased setbacks can be problematic as production companies try to improve efficiency by developing wells and infrastructure in corridors. In some cases, it could result in drilling more sites and disturbing more land.

Nevertheless, a number of landowners who are living with the effects of oil development asked to increase setbacks to at least 1,000 feet.

Mesker’s mother, Sharon Anderson, who lives on a ranch near Powers Lake, recited what she called a growing body of evidence through public and private studies that health risks in oil country are serious.

The result can be lung problems, birth defects, blood disorders, respiratory diseases, cancer and pre-term birth she said.

“Please don’t make our children the canaries in our environmental oil mine.”

Wally Owen of Medora asked committee members to empathize with people who have an oil well 500 feet from their homes.

As a local first responder, he said he has seen people who have been hurt, crushed, burned and soaked in oil.

Frank Leppell, who farms and ranches near Keene, said 500 feet is not far enough. “I believe in the rush to get oil out as fast as possible, state officials are not protecting the lives and livelihoods of the people.”

However, Daryl Dukart of Dunn Center, representing the Dunn County Energy Development organization, said it can work to keep well site equipment further from homes.

He said he is aware of several cases in Dunn County in which landowners negotiated with production companies to locate tanks and other equipment more than 1,000 feet from a home that was 500 feet to a well bore site.

The committee has not yet taken a vote on the bill.