

Powder River Resource Council was founded 40 years ago by Wyomingites who found that the extractive industries threatened their lands, ruined their creeks, destroyed their own health and that of their livestock. They discovered the companies acted with the blessings of Wyoming's state government.

Newly-elected Board Chair John Fenton writes that he and his wife became involved with PRBRC in response to being devastated by out-of control gas drilling and production. "The conditions that threaten our way of life and the futures of our families are made possible by a Wyoming state government that ignores the importance of resources essential to life" . . . which are "being destroyed for profit." He hopes to continue PRBRC's tradition of "insisting on responsible use of all the state's resources."

PRRC's publication, Powder River Breaks, gives voice to people whose testimonies are resisted or ignored by state legislators and governors who give preferential treatment to industries even when these have become profligate neighbors. Leland Turner of Campbell County writes that, while coal companies remain oblivious to the water scarcity they initiated, water remains a big issue for "the people of Wyoming and the West." in southern Campbell County "creek after creek" is falling victim to wholesale pollution. Having coal as neighbor has cost his family's ranching business "\$2 million in lost pasture, forage, and most importantly, water." As for reclamation, "in 30 years our cattle have never grazed on one mouthful of reclaimed grass."

Just as worrisome are nearby abandoned uranium strip mines. In spite of Abandoned Mines legislation, they exist "as they were abandoned fifty years ago." Mr. Turner suspects the same thing is happening with coal mines. Residents pay a steep price "for every load of coal that goes out of Wyoming," he said.

One of PRBRC's top efforts is to draw attention to "federal Abandoned Mine Lands funds." Noting that in the past Wyoming has spent AML funds on non-mining and non-reclamation related projects, including subsidies to the fossil-fuel industry and to Wyoming's university, PRBRC calls for Wyoming "to indicate our determination to spend AML funds only for those purposes contained in the original spirit of the fund." Such a resolution would present "a strong argument" to Washington for restoring some of the funding.

PRBRC also seeks to slow the current coal leasing frenzy. Of the roughly 7.8 billion tons of federal coal that have been leased since 1990, over two billion were leased "within the last year and a half, with over a billion tons leased to Peabody Energy alone." Hence, PRBRC contests the latest federal coal leases. Because "our concerns have been largely ignored by the BLM," PRBRC has resorted to legal challenges. "BLM must consider impacts of existing mining operations before leasing more coal to the mining companies." PRBRC notes that only "a paltry amount—less than 4 percent" of lands disturbed by mining meets the standards for re-vegetation and for restoration of surface aquifers.

Other top concerns focus on flaring, the burning-off of methane gas that, it seems, is a necessary evil for fifteen days before a well can enter production. When the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission lifted the limit on flaring (previously at 60 mcf), the practice went out of control. On December 10, 2012, several Douglas area residents sent a letter to WOGCC outlining the enormously negative impact, and the suffering they have endured as a result of the changed authorization.

“We live a mile away [from the Chesapeake field]” the neighboring landowners wrote, yet plants withered and died, and their livestock showed signs of severe stress. The residents justifiably fear for their own health. The racket was so bad, it drowned indoor conversation, yet the flaring-noise “went on 24/7 for months,” something that “would have been considered criminal if done by a private citizen.” This past summer, “Chesapeake abused our neighborhood” with “over 90 days of excessive flaring.” Black smoke and emissions dumped untold amounts of chemicals into the immediate vicinity and atmosphere.

The excessive and unnecessary flaring of methane also causes loss of revenue to the state of Wyoming; hence, the residents urge WOGCC to put pressure on the industry. They seek a hearing on their complaint. They want to know the reasons for delaying the installation of a pipeline capable of receiving the gas, and delay of a “facility to remove the liquid stream from the gas being flared.” They demand that the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality monitor industry emissions producing black smoke that’s probably “not meeting the WDEQ standards.”

“The oil field has moved into our neighborhood,” writes Kristi Morgan of Douglas, and “what I have witnessed this past summer concerns me deeply.” She writes of the evacuation following a well blow-out that turned out to be but the most overt problem since Chesapeake moved next door. Others were “undisclosed chemicals dispersed on our land and into the air we breathe . . . bloody noses . . . sick livestock . . . flares that released hydrocarbons, arsenic, and impurities . . . horrendous noise, like a jet engine running in our living room.” Ms. Morgan calls on the WDEQ to quit “issuing permits to industry to pollute” and start protecting “our health and environment.” Governor Mead, she says, must direct the agency to protect Wyomingites. The industry groups have the money to “Do it right,” but Wyoming must “step up to the plate and make sure they do.”

PRBRC objects to Wyoming government’s corporate socialism, such as “paying for market analysis for the big energy corporations,” efforts to promote the “shipping of Powder River coal to the West Coast and to China,” and plans to form an “educational K-12 program to indoctrinate our children” with wholesome pictures of fossil-fuel industries.

Such protests may seem extreme to city dwellers, but to residents whose neighborhoods are swamped with industrial development, these concerns are

matters of preserving the resources that are essential to life itself.