

(This is a follow-up page on the previous week's "Fracking" column)

On August 11, 2006, Windsor rig hands spotted drilling fluids and methane gas erupting along a nearby Park County road. Some of these blowholes were 150 feet from the rig. Officials and contract crews attempted for three hours to contain the eruptions; eventually, volunteer emergency services evacuated 25 homes in the Line Creek subdivision. For three days, as the company attempted to "kill" the well, eight million cubic feet of explosive methane and vaporized drilling fluids escaped into landscape and atmosphere. Two aquifers suffered severe contamination; they have yet to be cleaned up.

In the aftermath of the blowout, nobody informed Line Creek residents what to expect. "They just kept repeating that a gas blowout was a 'one in a million' occurrence," said Deb Thomas in her UWYO presentation, explaining that years earlier, as Windsor provoked three toxic spills and suffered fines for illegally dumping its drilling fluids, "our small community attempted to prepare for . . . a disaster. Again and again, residents asked how a 12-member, volunteer, first-response team could handle [an industrial accident of magnitude], how our neighborhood of 35 households could be evacuated safely on a narrow, one-way gravel road, how medical aid could reach us from 40 miles away."

Today in Clark, it's business as usual.

"The week following the blowout, Windsor received a WY Oil and Gas Commission permit to conduct seismic exploration, using shallow-placed explosives . . . on the same property. A week afterwards, the company got the go-ahead to resume drilling on the blowout site," says the Council's website. Thomas elaborated that "The fracking fluids that were supposed to revive the crippled well dissipated into rock formations; they were never recovered."

"Less than three thousand dollars, a slap on the wrist," Thomas said bitterly of the fine for the blowout. "The fine was imposed before any health ramifications could be assessed."

None of the residents—nor affected crew members, one of whom died within a year—has received any compensation to help deal with the myriad health problems they've had to shoulder, the most common of which are respiratory and neurological disorders, plus the post-traumatic stress they have suffered.

The Windsor blowout demonstrates that accidents do happen—serious, dangerous accidents. But even absent a "once in a million" occurrence, fracking chemicals contribute significantly to air and water pollution. To protect Wyoming state and BML lands, private property, and sensitive national forests, the Clark Resource Council tendered a Responsible Energy Development Plan that includes Best Management Practices (BMPs). Inasmuch as the BML has assumed the role of lead agency, the Council demands the agency "do it right" in future Beartooth gas and oil development.

"We cannot rush into rapid development at the expense of our clean air and water," says Thomas on the Council's website. "As pressures mount to maximize extraction of our fossil fuel resources. . . people [must be able to] gather the information and tools they need to protect their lands, both public and private, and their way of life."

Among the Council's Responsible Energy Development Plan are the following steps:

Company baseline monitoring of water quality and ozone **before** it begins its preparations for drilling;

At outset, submission of comprehensive Emergency and First Response plans;

Independent analysis of property values before, during, and after development;

Long-term protection of air and watersheds;

Site-specific bonding to cover reclamations as is done for coal mining.

The Plan also covers the protection of surface owners' rights, including the requirement that companies adequately and fairly compensate all surface owners, neighboring landowners, and the public for all damages to soil, surface water, drinking water, stock water, irrigation water, water quality, air quality, and health. It further asks for full disclosure to landowners and the public of all fluids used throughout the life cycle of the exploration and development, "including but not limited to drilling fluids, well stimulation fluids, hydraulic fracturing, well scrubbing."

The Plan further demands that, prior to obtaining permits to drill, the companies notify landowners and neighboring landowners of intended drilling operations, well stimulations, the placements of roads, well pads, pits, pipelines, and compressor stations. The permits should be disclosed along with lease nominations, lease auction dates and locations, and lease sales.

It would be good to know if such a plan underlies the Niobrara operations, put into action last year. The plan would go a long way toward covering potential fracking disasters.