https://www.thecheyennepost.com/opinion/plugging-wyomings-leaks/article_cc55ac44-a482-11ec-b8d1-03c2180dade3.html

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On November 15, 2021, President Biden signed into law the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), commonly referred to as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill. The president hailed the $4.7 billion in funding to cap orphaned oil and gas wells as a move to tackle "super-polluting methane emissions" while simultaneously combatting the climate crisis and creating jobs.

Uncapped wells leaking dangerous amounts of methane— Wyoming has been left with close to 1500 leaking wells—are a huge problem and a worry on the minds of many residents, so I hoped whatever state agency is in charge would get to work right away. The Wyoming workers unemployed since 2020, when a number of high-profile coal companies filed for bankruptcy protection, are desperate for jobs. In many cases they not only lost pension plans but also healthcare coverage.

It's March 2022, and surely our state's apportionment of the IIJA money has found its way into Wyoming coffers, yet no directions have been issued by Governor Gordon for the clean-up of the well sites. When I searched the governor's website, the only reference I could find was a press release of January 29, 2022: "Governor Gordon Establishes Leadership Team to Ensure Federal Infrastructure Bill is Implemented on Wyoming's Terms."

Ah so. The governor wants the Fed money but thinks he should be entitled to spend it "my way." Rob Creager, a senior policy adviser in his office will work with a group of agency personnel, says the release, so that "we have an organized approach and target our resources to ensure our efforts are aligned with Wyoming's needs and values." In other words, all parties involved are sitting on their hands. No capping of wells is in the offing. If there's any whiff the action might address the climate crisis, no red-blooded Wyomingites, let alone their governor, will consent to it, he seems to be saying.

This isn't the first time—and it won't be the last—that the governor has expressed his contempt for regulations attached to federal funds. Many Wyoming legislators sing from the same hymnal. Last year, when Wyoming received significant federal funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Senate Education Committee Chairman Charles Scott (R-Casper), always eager to take the ax to education spending, said that "We're still trying to figure out what the feds have done to us."

The comment was printed in Wyofile, an independent nonprofit news organization focused on Wyoming, in an article by Nick Reynolds of March 23, 2021. It was reiterated by Nate Martin's newsletter for Better Wyoming, a grassroots institute that seeks to advance social and environmental justice.

Martin speaks of "last year's massive, $1.9 trillion dollar stimulus bill that President Biden signed into law on March 11, 2021." According to estimates, the package included $1.3 billion in aid to Wyoming for everything from schools and healthcare facilities to local government and unemployment insurance.

Yes, comments Martin, in Wyoming, lawmakers talk about reaping a huge cash infusion "as something the feds *did to us."*

Martin points out that, even in a normal year—and the Covid year of 2021 was far from normal—lawmakers push the narrative that Wyoming is somehow abused by the federal government, when "According to Pew Charitable Trusts, nearly 45 percent of Wyoming's revenue comes in the form of federal grants and other disbursements.

There is no urgent budget crisis in Wyoming, writes Martin, railing against last year's draconian cuts, "only lawmakers with ideological beliefs against 'big government' who have found a convenient excuse to cut spending no matter how much it hurts Wyoming and its people." Legislators were "leaning toward cruelty."

He adds that Rep. Andy Schwartz (D-Jackson) said, the fact that Gordon has identified nearly a half-billion dollars for savings is a sign that Wyoming isn't broke. Lawmakers should focus on restoring appropriations to vital services rather than building up savings. Meanwhile the governor wants to set aside $100 million for energy projects like "carbon capture," a fantasy-like technology that—allegedly, someday—would allow Wyoming to continue burning coal while not contributing to climate change, fumes Martin.

WyoFile's Dustin Bleizeffer commented on November 30, 2021, on the governor's proposed budget for 2023/24 by quoting Ashley Harpstreith of the Taxpayers' Association:

"Gordon's budget proposal represents a continuation of the boom-and-bust cycle that Wyoming's been tied to for decades," Harpstreith said. "Only this time, the temporary injection of revenue is coming from federal stimulus spending rather than a boom in energy development."

The Bleizeffer article shows that state personal tax collections provided a mere $3,500 versus expenditures for public services of $27,090. "Our total revenue portfolio is becoming more volatile, not less," he quotes Don Richards, budget manager for the legislative service office.

Bleizeffer includes Gordon's snide remark on the Biden Administration's purported "single-mindedness" in "trying to remove fossil fuels" but notes that "Several billion dollars flowing to Wyoming from the American Rescue Plan Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will also factor heavily into this year's budget discussions."

Yet I read a line-item veto letter, addressed to the president of the Wyoming legislature, in which the governor speaks of the several billion as "fleeting fed funds."

Some reader comments on the Bleizeffer article:

Rock McEwen writes: “Anyway you look at it the typical Wyomingite is a wastrel on the dole. For gosh sakes the Feds own damned near half the State.”

Another reader, George Wilten, comments: “If the State of Wyoming had any balls they would tax real estate transactions in Teton County on a progressive scale and use that money for state-wide essential services.”

Wilton also notes, “In regards to the Federal money, it is funny how our Wyoming ‘conservatives’ happily accept it while at the same time . . . crying about federal spending and our nation’s debt & deficit.”

Back to https://governor.wyo.gov/ where another item, related to but more prominently displayed than the news release about the IIJA money, is dated February 24, 2022. It states that Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to develop “a regional clean hydrogen hub.” “Together, the states will work to compete for a portion of the $8 billion allocated in the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act [the IIJA money] towards four or more regional hydrogen hubs.”

Eight billion is a chunk of change, but you can see where this is going: right back to the governor’s coal project—carbon capture, utilization, and storage, aka CCUS—this time spread over four states and dressed up as ”regional clean hydrogen.”

Ron Smith Powell, writing in the January/February 2022 issue of Powder River Breaks, a publication of the Powder River Basin Resource Council, nixes the idea of hydrogen capture in a lengthy article entitled, “High Stakes of Wyoming’s Electric Power Future.” PacifiCorp, which supplies electric power to six states including Wyoming, recently released a forecast of future demand as part of its 2021 Integrated Resource Plan, which “excludes any CCUS in its preferred portfolio.” The downfalls of coal-based CCUS have been sufficiently demonstrated, and “HB 200 [enacted in 2000] did not change reality by fiat,” writes Powell.

”It’s much more expensive to pull carbon from a coal-fired power plant than from other sources like fertilizer plants,” writes Powell. “Indeed, the only operating industrial carbon-capture projects the Energy Department (DOE) funded are an ethanol plant in Illinois and a hydrogen plant in Texas.”

He adds a word of caution. “The pursuit of ill-conceived, coal-based CCUS has persisted in part due to unwise and unwatched federal funding . . . DOE may expend significant taxpayer funds on CCUS demonstrations that have little likelihood of success. This warning might apply to Wyoming . . . “

DeSmog has similar misgivings on a national scale. In “Anointed with Big Oil,” its editor warns that, without tight rules, the IIJA funds could be spent in ways that contradict the law’s goals — and go to the very entities that enabled the environmental messes in the first place.

Currently no rules “compel state oil and gas regulators to use the federal funds in a way that prioritizes plugging the inactive and supposedly ownerless wells that are emitting the most methane, or even any methane at all. The law’s current implementation also offers no assurances that the new jobs promised for oil and gas industry workers will materialize, although it is a stated goal of the law.”

Last November decarbonization consultant Megan Milliken Biven warned against granting billions of dollars to state oil and gas regulators to tackle America’s orphan well problem and proposed strong federal action instead. Since then, in an attempt to safeguard the funds in what she describes as an imperfect bill, Biven has been advocating for a set of rules she devised to govern the law’s implementation before the funds are spent.

Not that it’ll do anything for Wyoming’s methane-leaking wells.