

Elected leaders must heed local voices

By David Smith
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Editor's note: This is the first in an occasional series of opinion pieces from the frontlines of environmental challenges in New Mexico.

As Penny Aucoin began recalling the night when a pipeline burst and showered her home near Carlsbad in hazardous oil and gas wastewater, it sunk in just how badly we are failing to protect people who live alongside our state's powerful and unregulated oil and gas industry.

Penny's story from the heart of the Permian Basin reflects a reality too many other families in New Mexico are familiar with: their proximity to oil and gas pipelines, flares and big truck traffic are resulting in poor air quality, regularly hazy sunsets and dangerous roads.

We better understand the impacts on people and how to protect their health if we listen to their stories. Stories are compelling, and they connect us together in a world that has become too divisive. Our organization's *Unearthed* video series explores oil and gas issues in New Mexico, and our 2020 update released last week gives voice to the struggles of those like Penny that show what happens when we put profit over the health and safety of our citizens and ignore the long-term effects this industry has on our planet.

In standing up for her family's health, Penny and husband Dee George have been given the cold shoulder by others in their community. In an "oil and gas town," talking about the real and dangerous consequences of production is not welcome.

But that should not excuse our decision-makers and leaders from doing the same. The evidence is clear — pollution levels in the Permian and the Four Corners area are some of the worst in the U.S. For example, both Eddy and San Juan counties received an "F" for ozone pollution from the American Lung Association. People who live in close proximity to oil and gas development suffer a higher rate of health issues than people who do not. These realities are not new, and it begs the question why we

have allowed them to linger for so long.

Thankfully, things are finally heading in the right direction. Before 2019, the Oil Conservation Division only issued three fines over 11 years on oil and gas operators. Upon taking office, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's administration took decisive action to begin holding the oil and gas industry accountable for its pollution and waste by working with the Legislature to fix a loophole that prevented state regulators from issuing fines for breaking the New Mexico Oil and Gas Act.

Her administration is now working to create comprehensive methane and air pollution rules and regulations on how oil and gas wastewater — known as produced water — is managed and used. These are essential steps forward — and yet they come too late for families like Penny and Dee's.

When we interviewed Penny and Dee, they shared the embarrassing reality that there is not one field employee in the New Mexico Environment Department — one of the agencies in charge of protecting public health — based in the Permian Basin. The other agency, the Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, has been gutted to the core. According to recent research by New Mexico Wild, these departments' budgets were cut by 25 percent to 30 percent under the Martinez administration. Over the same time, oil and gas production in New Mexico increased by 248 percent.

This chronic underfunding has left impacted people and communities to fend for themselves. At a minimum, the Legislature must equip state agencies with the funding they need long-term to tackle the daunting challenges we're facing when it comes to our environment. Once they have the funding they need, these agencies must do more to protect people living near oil and gas operations. In the meantime, their stories deserve all our attention. We hope legislators and decision-makers across the state will visit UnearthedNM.org to hear from Penny, Dee and others across the state.

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