

How close is too close?

Supporters of bill want drilling away from schools

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PARACHUTE — John “Dutch” Wierenga suffers from pulmonary and cardiac diseases and relies on supplemental oxygen to breathe. He worries about what it could mean for him if Ursa Resources proceeds with seeking approval for an oil and gas well pad that could be less than 500 feet from his house.

“I ain’t sure I’ll live through the well drilling, with the dust, the fumes and everything,” he said Tuesday as he relaxed among the cottonwoods shading the nearly six acres where he and his wife Margaret live near the Colorado River.

But his own health isn’t Wierenga’s biggest concern should the potential well pad location become a reality. Instead, he worries about the students who attend Grand Valley High School, which is adjacent to his property and could be less than 700 feet away from the site Ursa has identified as a potential drilling location.

Wierenga is among supporters of state legislation that would change current 1,000-foot minimum setback requirements between oil and gas operations and schools, so that the setback would be measured from school property lines rather than school buildings themselves. He said the increased setback would cut down on the impact to students from the noise, dust and odors of oil and gas operations. Oil and gas companies “do put off some fumes” when they’re developing wells, he said.

Leslie Robinson, with the Grand Valley Citizens Alliance, said the bill’s backers aren’t asking for much — just basically that companies be willing to move pads about a city block further from schools. And Emily Hornback with the Western Colorado Congress, a community action alliance, said it would provide more protection for youths who are breathing heavily while recreating on school grounds outside buildings.



GRETEL DAUGHERTY/The Daily Sentinel

Emily Hornback with the Western Colorado Congress stands on a road that is 1,000 feet from the center of an Ursa drilling pad. Behind her is a sound wall. Hornback was demonstrating the distance, to make the case for new state legislation that would increase the distance between drilling pads and schools, playgrounds and exercise fields.

“They’re getting more exposure to whatever (air pollution) might be coming off the pad,” she said.

ISSUE ‘NOT GOING AWAY’

Supports of the bill say the potential Ursa site is part of a growing trend of companies seeking to drill near schools as oil and gas development increasingly pushes into residential areas.

“It’s an issue that’s not going away, that’s for sure,” said state Rep. Mike Foote, the Boulder County Democrat who introduced the bill last week. It’s scheduled for a committee hearing in the House of Representatives on Thursday.

Several members of the public pushed for the measure’s passage Monday during a Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission meeting in Loveland. Among the cases that the bill’s supporters cite is the COGCC’s approvals for companies to drill dozens of wells on pads some 300 to 400 feet from playgrounds or outdoor athletic facilities at three schools

in Greeley. They also point to a 2014 well site fire that forced students at a school in Frederick to shelter in place. That site was 1,700 feet from the school, which has other oil and gas facilities closer to it.

Some oil and gas facilities near schools were approved before the latest setback requirements the COGCC adopted in 2013. Those requirements include a 1,000-foot minimum setback for high-occupancy buildings such as schools. However, the COGCC can waive that setback in individual cases following a hearing.

SEEKING ALTERNATIVES

In the case of the potential Ursa site, Ursa would need to seek such a waiver even under current rules if it pursues drilling there because of the site’s proximity to the school building. But while Ursa had proposed drilling there last year, it later backed off the proposal, at least for the time being. Don Simpson, an Ursa vice presi-

Potential well pad cited in push for school drilling setback bill



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For 20 years, John "Dutch" Wierenga has lived with his wife, Margaret, on their six acres at 8610 Highway 6&24, below Grand Valley High School in Parachute. Urso bought the land on the other side of the road behind him and plans to drill 22 wells on the property from the proposed Lucy Park pad.

CLOSE: Schools would benefit, industry says

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dent, said Tuesday that the company continues to look for other locations it might be able to use to access the same minerals.

"We have no immediate plans for the pad right now. It's not on our schedule," he said. "... It's a potential pad site and we're looking at alternatives."

He noted that Urso met with Garfield County School District 16 officials back when it proposed the site, showed them other Urso drilling operations in the area, and sought to answer questions they had.

In a letter to Western Slope lawmakers last week, David Ludlam, executive director of the West Slope Colorado Oil and Gas Association, said the school district owns minerals that would be produced from the pad, "a reality that will result in much needed revenue to a school district facing ongoing budget shortfalls and financial challenges. To this end, the school district has approached the possible future location with optimism and belief in an ability to create mutually beneficial, safe and collaborative natural gas production plans for the site."

The district is on spring break and Superintendent Ken Haptonstall couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday. The school board hadn't gotten to the point of taking a position on the pad proposal before Urso withdrew it. Haptonstall previously has said conversations with Urso touched on issues such as air pollution mitigation measures, whether truck access to the pad could be via a route other than by the school, and whether drilling could be limited to when school is out in the summer.

POINTING FINGERS, OR NOT?

Ludlam contends in his letter that Urso has listened careful-

ly to the district and worked to address its concerns, and for citizen groups to cite the location in connection with the new bill "is disingenuous, out of context and meant to politicize a possible future development location. To date, all discussion around the location has reflected a model of communication and collaboration between the operator, local school district, Garfield County officials and local land-use authorities."

Said Hornback, "We're not here to point fingers at Urso. ... It's not about any particular operator."

She credited Urso for its outreach to the school district, and for its overall efforts to reduce the number of pads it is planning to drill from in the Parachute and Battlement Mesa area. For her, it's simply a matter of how close companies should be allowed to drill near playgrounds, ballfields and modular school buildings versus a school itself.

She believes the point was underscored by a recent fire in the residential community of Battlement Mesa involving some grout material a pipeline company had been using to stop groundwater flow around lines to be used by Urso in that community. While the fire was small, it raised safety concerns from some residents, in part because the grout is described by its manufacturer as being highly toxic when it burns.

Foote, the bill's sponsor, has said he thinks its fate will be decided in the state Senate, and will require some industry support to get through that Republican-controlled body.

Said Hornback, "We have a narrow path in the Senate, but I think there is a path."

She hopes the measure gets support from companies that already work to keep operations away from schools.

Simpson believes drilling can

occur safely near schools, as demonstrated by his own case. He went to school in the middle of an oil and gas field while growing up in Louisiana.

"I wasn't adversely affected," he said.

Bob Randall, executive director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, told the oil and gas commission this week that the department is still evaluating the measure, which has some challenges when it comes to some undefined terms and in how its language is to be interpreted.

"We're trying to figure out the scope of the bill and what it would do," he said.

WAITING GAME

Meanwhile, the Wierengas wait to see whether the peace and quiet they now enjoy in their retirement years will be interrupted by nearby drilling by Urso. The pad it proposed last year would have been less than 500 feet from their house, meaning Urso would have had to seek the Wierengas' permission or obtain a waiver from the oil and gas commission.

Margaret Wierenga credited Urso for being responsive in tearing down an abandoned building on the potential pad site, which it has purchased. Urso had been reacting to concerns about vandalism, drug use and kids playing with fire in the building.

But if drilling should go forward on the pad site, the Wierengas expect it to disrupt the deer, elk and wild turkeys they now see visiting the area. And besides the possible impacts to Dutch Wierenga's health, they expect to take a hit to the value of the property they've invested in for 20 years.

"We put everything we had in this," he said. "... We really can't afford to move. We've got all our eggs in one basket here."