

Water and true believers

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Perspective

The Powder River Basin Resource Council has been called a lot of things lately as we've tried to insert science and sound policy into the debate over management of coalbed methane produced water. It seems as though any proposal for change, any suggestion that things are not being done perfectly, any request for thoughtful improvement is taken as an assault on someone's job, someone's God-guaranteed wealth, or someone's competence.

We've recently been called "loudmouths," "whiners," "luddites," and even (gasp!) "environmentalists." True Belief (meaning, I guess, total agreement with all industry practices and all government acquiescences) is necessary to escape these labels.

The council is, first and foremost, a private property rights organization, advocating rural landowners' right to pursue sustainable agricultural practices and lifestyles.

We do not oppose the coal-bed methane industry in general, nor do we oppose vibrant economic development. We value good schools, paved roads, low taxes, jobs and other benefits of sustainable development, and we realize that healthy resource industries make these things possible. Powder River is strongly and loudly in favor of economic development that pays its own way and is environmentally sound.

But we do not favor practices that, in a misguided attempt to enhance the economics of an already very profitable industry, seek to "externalize" development costs that should be borne by industry or government. "Externalized" costs are those foisted on third parties instead of on the producer, the consumer or the government entity that benefits from taxing industry.

When a rancher's land is devalued, when his field is flooded, when his trees are killed, he is forced to shoulder a cost burden that should be paid by the CBM producer (in profits forgone to pay for proper water disposal) or by the taxing authority (through tax deductions, credits or infrastructure assistance).

Costs such as these should not rest on the shoulders of innocent third parties -- in this case, the small surface-owner rancher and landowner. But today, in Wyoming, they do. That's the basis for our attempt to help the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality establish regulations that minimize externalized costs of managing CBM water.

We are pursuing these solutions on three fronts. We have filed a request for rulemaking with the state Environmental Quality Council, which would require DEQ to consider discharge quantity when it affects soil or water quality. Second, we have met and continue to meet with the director of DEQ and industry representatives to discuss our concerns and ideas. Finally, several of our members have participated actively in "watershed-based permitting" groups for Clear Creek and other drainages.

What our organization is trying to accomplish is, at heart, a reflection of the importance of water to all Wyomingites.

We seek management practices that do not result in our most precious resource -- the water, accumulated over millennia, that makes our agriculture industry possible -- being shipped out of our state as a waste product. Where it's possible, we favor re-injection. Where it's not, we favor pipelining the water to areas where it can be re-injected, or to places like Sheridan or Gillette that need it. We oppose a short-term industry pumping us dry for the long term, for the sake of short-lived prosperity and profits. Depriving our descendents of vast quantities of water would be a massive externalization of costs, and it need not occur.

We also support management methods tailored to individual circumstances. "One size fits all" regulations and practices rarely work in most situations, especially the arid West.

The quality of CBM-produced water varies greatly by region, and even from well to well. We congratulate ranchers whose subsurface methane produces high-quality water; but Wyoming must also protect those who sit over different aquifers. That my neighbor benefits greatly from produced water irrigation does not mean that water from a CBM well drilled on my land will not kill my alfalfa. I should have a choice, and industry should have an obligation, to ensure this does not happen.

Decisions concerning water management must be made scientifically, on a case-by-case basis. They must not flow only from True Belief in the goodness of an industry.

Produced water of a certain quality can be very valuable for stock watering, but be detrimental or deadly when placed on forage crops. It should be the landowner's choice.

A little produced water of a certain quality can be useful in irrigating a hay field, but accumulated runoff in a neighbor's draw can kill his trees, create a cattail bog where nutritional forage once existed, and block cattle movement. It should be the downstream rancher's choice what ends up on his land.

Produced water of a certain quality can be valuable for irrigating alfalfa or wheat grass, but be deadly for high-value vegetable crops.

Our organization stands for rational debate and practical solutions, and fair allocation of costs to those who benefit directly from an activity. We are not "True Believers" in any one course of action.

We applaud all development that is environmentally sound and pays its own way. Is that so hard?

Bob LeResche of Sheridan chairs the board of the Powder River Basin Resource Council.