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Hearing on "The Importance of Public Disclosure Requirements for Protecting Human Health, the Climate, and the Environment" and H.R. 5636, *Transparency in Energy Production Act of 2020*

Before the Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
Natural Resources Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

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Introduction

Chairman Lowenthal, Ranking Member Gosar, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today regarding "The Importance of Public Disclosure Requirements for Protecting Human Health, the Climate, and the Environment." I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to be here.

My name is Victor Snover, and I'm the Mayor of Aztec, New Mexico. I'm also a current high school Army JROTC instructor, and after 22 years of service, a retired United States Army Non-Commissioned Officer. I come before you today to advocate for the hardworking people of Aztec, New Mexico, many of whom are disproportionately impacted by fossil fuel emissions leading to short and long-term impacts on their health, community and livelihoods. The legislation before us today would help communities like mine make informed decisions regarding the impacts of harmful oil and gas emissions. Ranging from how we spend our small local budget -- from healthcare to infrastructure, education and mitigation from local oil and gas pollution – to if our kids should spend time outside on a particular day due to the high rates of pollutants in the air.

Background

I am an elected City Commissioner, the Mayor of Aztec, but my day job is as a public high school teacher at Aztec High School. Anecdotally, I would estimate approximately half of my students suffer from some form of respiratory issues. I recognize that there can be other mitigating factors for this, but I also believe that we should be doing everything within our power, as elected officials and policy makers, to reduce as many of those contributing factors as we possibly can. That means having the courage to hold those contributors to these issues, like the oil and gas industry, accountable. Maximizing profits should never be a factor when it comes to public health and safety. At minimum, our community should know what kinds of emissions are being pumped into our atmosphere from the oil and gas industry.

In 2014, NASA discovered what has often been described as a "Delaware sized methane cloud" in the upper atmosphere above the Four Corners region of the US.[1] My community of Aztec is in the heart of this region nestled in the far Northwest corner of the beautiful state of New Mexico.

Covering approximately 2,500 sq/mi. of our region, the Four Corners methane hot spot is the most concentrated area of methane pollution in the entire United States.[2] This problem affects tens of thousands of people in this region living in communities like Farmington, Bloomfield and my home of Aztec along with many other towns in New Mexico. This methane cloud did not just suddenly appear, it's the result of years of companies polluting our air without detailing the full extent of their project's impacts. H.R. 5636, the *Transparency in Energy Production Act of 2020* would begin to remedy this problem.

Take Colorado, which has become a model for us to emulate. In 2014, they placed limits on methane emissions, and their oil and gas industry is still going strong. Their example provides proof of the concept that reducing waste and emissions does not harm the industry, but more importantly that it can help the health, well-being, and quality of life of the people living in and around extraction sites, while still creating jobs. Many states are leading the way, but we need alignment with the federal government.

In New Mexico, under current regulations and rules, there is an annual loss of $275 million in energy resources and an additional $43 million in state tax and royalty revenue that we could and that we should be investing in our school systems.[3] In a state where our education system consistently ranks in the lower tier nationally, any opportunity to increase revenue for educational programs should be explored.

New Mexico's methane emissions are said to have the same short-term impacts on our climate as 22 coal-fired power plants or 28 million internal combustion automobiles.[4]

Beyond resource and revenue losses, the unnecessary leaks of methane are allowing other harmful forms of pollution to escape that lead to ozone smog. The state's air quality data shows that San Juan County, which is the county in which Aztec is located, is at risk of violating federal ozone standards.[5] We should not be willing to accept outcomes that put industry profit over the general health and clean air standards that we need to live healthy and productive lives. In areas with diminished air quality, it is often the youngest and the oldest among us that suffer disproportionately and it's the poorest of us that suffer most because they don't possess the resources to move further away from well sites and/or seek the needed medical treatment to help with their respiratory issues like emphysema and asthma.

Thankfully the State of New Mexico is now turning the corner to be on the leading edge of working to understand and reduce emissions resulting from oil and gas. But unfortunately, the federal government –

[1] https://science.nasa.gov/science-news/science-at-nasa/2014/09oct_methanehotspot/

[2] https://science.nasa.gov/science-news/science-at-nasa/2014/09oct_methanehotspot/

[3] http://blogs.edf.org/energyexchange/files/2019/09/Synapse-Methane-Cost-Benefit-Report.pdf

[4] http://blogs.edf.org/energyexchange/files/2019/09/Synapse-Methane-Cost-Benefit-Report.pdf

[5] https://www.sanjuancitizens.org/oil-and-gas/new-epa-ozone-standard-does-not-go-far-enough

mainly the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) – is failing to do so, thus taking us backwards, and risking our public health and livelihood in the process.

The legislation before us today is a good first step at addressing these environmental injustices and the climate crisis. It will empower state and local leaders to make informed decisions about their communities' energy needs. With greater information, we will have a more informed citizenry, who can make better decisions about their futures. As Thomas Jefferson once said, "an educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people."[6] I believe that holds true here today, perhaps. more than ever.

Emissions from U.S. Public Lands

Our federal lands play an important role in climate change and should also play a role in the solutions. The U.S. government is one of the largest energy asset managers in the world, and yet it has done little to inform its shareholders—American taxpayers—about the federal energy program and its associated climate related risks.

Where there is fossil fuel production there are emissions. Emissions associated with oil, gas and coal production from federal lands are equivalent to more than 20% of total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. For comparison, if federal lands were a country, it would rank 5th in the world in total emissions behind China, India, the U.S. and Russia.[7]

Until recently, the federal government was not tracking emissions from fossil fuel production on federal lands, and is still not developing a plan to reduce them. The government does not have one, centralized publicly accessible database for all data related to federal oil, natural gas and coal. The data that is available, while useful, is incomplete. Further, there are no sources available that provide a comprehensive accounting of greenhouse emissions from federal lands.

America's public lands belong to the American people and they, as a result, have a right to know how much energy is being developed and the associated climate risks. Just as shareholders of publicly traded companies receive key information regarding □nancial risk to their portfolios, taxpayers deserve to know how their energy assets are being managed and have a say in the direction of the federal energy program moving forward.

We have a solution to fight climate change. It's our public lands. While current management of our nation's public lands makes them a significant contributor to the U.S. climate change problem, they have the potential to play an even bigger role in climate solutions.

Requests

To make our nation's public lands part of the climate solution instead of the problem, the federal government should immediately reduce fossil fuel emissions from public lands. We must reduce emissions tied to energy development on public lands and waters at or ahead of the pace dictated by

[6] Wagoner, Jennings. *Jefferson and Education*. Charlottesville, VA.: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2004.

[7] https://www.wilderness.org/articles/article/federal-lands-emissions-accountability-tool

climate science. Emissions from coal, oil and gas produced on public lands and waters make up more than 20% of the U.S.'s total greenhouse gas emissions. As such, policymakers must establish an ambitious goal of net zero emissions from public lands and waters by 2030.

While driving down fossil fuel emissions, we must simultaneously unlock the potential of the U.S.'s public lands and waters to help achieve a clean energy future**.** Some of our nation's best solar, wind and geothermal resources are found on public lands. Carefully choosing the best sites and expanding renewable energy development on public lands can help boost local economies, provide new job opportunities across a range of skill levels, and generate additional revenue streams for state and local governments.

As the U.S. federal government is one of the largest energy asset managers in the world, and yet still does not sufficiently track or make available the data associated with the production and emissions from fossil fuels developed on federal lands and waters, we need a better way. H.R.5636—the Transparency in Energy Production Act of 2019 (TEPA) takes a first step by directing companies seeking or holding a lease to drill on public lands to track and report the amount of energy production and resulting emissions from federal lands and waters, and more speci□cally, the following:

1. Uses standards established by nationally recognized Sustainable Accounting Standards Board (SASB) to report the amount, type, and source of fossil fuels produced under Federal leases, including the methane gas released by venting, □aring, and fugitive release on federal lands.
2. Reports the amount of energy produced by renewable energy projects on federal lands.
3. Makes information publicly available through database created and maintained by the Department of the Interior.

By beginning to implement policies that reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, curb emissions, promote renewable energy all under a transparent process then we can transition our economy into a clean energy future where no one gets left behind because we have all the necessary information up front. Our public lands are a great first place to start.