

Pavillion residents, businesses battle water perceptions

Most people have no problem, governor told

By Martin Reed
Staff Writer

With all the attention on water quality issues in the Pavillion area, Miss Ginny's Roost proprietor Ginny Warren wondered whether she should install a water filtration visible inside her restaurant — even though the water there is fine.

"At least I would have the perception I'm being proactive to protect my guests," Warren said.

The owner said business has dropped 60 percent since concerns were expressed about Pavillion's water quality.

Warren said she is feeling the effects even though water supplied by the municipal wells and infrastructure to Pavillion's households and businesses is not part of the quality concerns that may be connected to energy development several miles east of town.

For example, during the Christmas season, two large parties canceled their gatherings, saying to Warren that their guests didn't want to come to Pavillion because they were afraid of the water.

"It's the perception," Warren said. "I don't know what to do."

Her concerns were among several Gov. Matt Mead heard

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VINCE DOLBOW

Pavillion area farmer, on media attention generated by reports of water contamination possibly tied to gas drilling

during a private meeting Monday at Central Wyoming College in Riverton. A dozen or so landowners in the Pavillion area said concerns about water quality are overblown.

"My concern is we're trying to fix a problem that does not exist," landowner Vince Dolbow said to the governor.

From shrinking property values and difficulties in securing home financing, to

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Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead, above, heard Pavillion-area landowners discuss water quality issues during a meeting Monday at Central Wyoming College in Riverton. Economist and farm manager Vince Dolbow, left, told the governor that water quality concerns at certain drilling depths were well-established around Pavillion for decades before hydraulic fracturing began.

Photos by Jamie Drendel

battling a barrage of what they call misinformation, the group of landowners is dealing with repercussions from national and global attention.

"The misinformation is one of the reasons that we're here, that's brought us to this point," said Jon Martin, a concerned landowner who helped organize the meeting with Mead.

The frustrations expressed by the meeting's attendees follows a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency report citing a possible link between water quality in the area and the practice of hydraulic fracturing, a method of extracting gas from the ground.

The meeting at CWC consisted of landowners and a handful of government officials. Mead's office did not publicize the first meeting on the governor's public schedule for this week.

Unlike the private meetings Mead had weeks ago with Pavillion area landowners who complained about their poor water quality, those Monday criticized the negative publicity and the allegations.

Some noted that water quality at certain depths in the area has been questionable for a century or more, ever since settlers inhabited the area.

"When this area was first developed, they knew there was gas in the area," said county commissioner Dennis Christensen, who lives near the region in question.

"My well is at less than 200 feet, and I have perfect water," Christensen said, noting some minor chloride and other issues.

He and others contend that dollar signs are driving the highly publicized debate.

"I think if you follow the money trail, it's a few greedy people," Christensen said.

Dolbow provided the governor with a history of Pavillion area

landowners seeking money for energy development on their land over past decades.

The agricultural economist by education and farm manager by trade talked about gas wells in the 1960s.

"The water wells were making gas before there were ever any gas wells, let alone fracking," he said.

High sulfates and sodium have not been a stranger to water quality reports in past decades, Dolbow said, adding that "water was bad historically" at one affected residence.

As drilling was set to boom during the early 2000s, landowners received surface agreement payment offers that some saw as too low, Dolbow said.

Talk among landowners at the time involved putting pressure on energy companies for higher surface agreement payments, getting the EPA involved and filing a lawsuit, he said.

In one disagreement over energy development, a landowner reached a settlement in 2005 that some said was a "successful case of extortion" against the energy industry, Dolbow said.

The landowners without water quality problems contend that the subsequent EPA investigation results have wrongly placed the spotlight on the Pavillion area.

"Now this has been such a blown-out thing in the media," Dolbow said after national news organizations reported on the issue and congressional hearings took place.

Martin said the reality of the situation is that just a few people are suffering from poor water quality in the area.

"What's happened is there's been a lot of misinformation out there," Martin said to Mead. "You get three suspicious wells out of 39. Three wells get all the press."

Martin blamed a select group

of landowners for making statements on behalf of everyone in the area.

"They have taken it upon themselves to represent us all with blanket statements that are just not true," he said.

Martin said his water quality remains fine at his farm home east of Pavillion.

"My well is 100 feet deep, no problem," he said.

Others are facing mounting challenges trying to sell their land even though they say their water is fine. Landowner Steve Hugus said one potential buyer asked for the location of his property in relation to one of the more vocal residents.

"I share a fence with him. 'Well, I'm not interested in buying your property,'" Hugus said about his conversation.

"All of these stories are developing a perception that is not reality, and I don't know how to combat it," he said.

The group is working to counter the vocal activists in the Pavillion Area Concerned Citizens group, which is relaying the message that energy development is adversely affecting water quality.

At a publicized meeting later in the morning, area landowner John Fenton, an outspoken member of the group, said his property values have been negatively affected.

"We're not unsympathetic to what's going on in the area, and there has been a lack of communication" between both sides in the debate, Fenton said. "I'm just glad we can get together like this."

For Martin and others, they're building momentum on their own movement.

"Silence is not golden," he said. "We've been silent way too long."