

**Statement of Barbara Vasquez  
Board Member:  
Western Organization of Resource Councils  
and Western Colorado Alliance**

**House Natural Resources Committee  
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources  
Legislative Hearing on HR 1555, HR 5639, HR 7831, HR 7872, HR 7882  
March 25, 2026**

**Introduction**

My name is Barbara Vasquez. I have served as a citizen scientist and advocate on local, regional and national environmental and public health issues for the past 25 years. After earning a Ph.D. in biochemistry, I pursued two distinct careers: biomedical research at the National Institutes of Health for seven years followed by a longer tenure in the semiconductor industry. Working in research and development led to senior management positions in that industry in four different countries over a 23-year career.

As I approached retirement, I looked for a new home with more four-footed than two-footed residents. I discovered “North Park”, the local name for Jackson County, Colorado. This rural county in north central Colorado covers approximately 1,600 square miles and is approximately 65% public lands. The economic base includes high mountain hay and cattle ranching, outdoor recreation (hiking, hunting, fishing, birding, wildlife viewing, etc.) and increasingly, oil and gas development.

The central part of the basin is a sagebrush sea at 8,000 feet, much of which is priority habitat for greater sage-grouse. The basin is home to the USFWS Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge and is ringed by mountains, several wilderness areas and is adjacent to Rocky Mountain National Park. The mountains form the headwaters of the North Platte River. The incredible landscapes, the diverse plant and animal life and large swaths of public lands in both the basin and surrounding mountains are what drew me to make this my new and final home.

Viewing wildlife every time I drive or recreate in North Park brings me amazing joy! I frequently see raptors like bald and golden eagles, many species of hawks and the occasional osprey as well as many members of our large and diverse populations of wildlife including bear, moose, deer, pronghorn, elk and big horn sheep. These as well as the keystone species in the sagebrush sea, the greater sage-grouse, are common visitors to my property. A few years ago a pack of wolves established themselves in North Park in advance of the state-level reintroduction program. The opportunities to hike, backpack, snowshoe and cross-country ski on public lands up and down this basin and in the mountains surrounding it are treasured experiences.

When I retired in 2005, I had the goal of retiring TO work for that which I have a passion, helping to ensure clean air, clean water and contiguous healthy wildlife habitat, rather than FROM my two professional careers. I have lived that intention for the past 20 years. As examples, I served on the Bureau of Land Management’s Resource Advisory Council for Northwest Colorado from 2011-2017. I served as Vice Chair of the USFS Greater Rocky Mountain Advisory Committee which covered all the forests in Colorado and Wyoming until it was disbanded in 2025. I have served on the Colorado Water Conservation Board since 2023 and am currently Vice Chair. Among other water issues, we are dealing with the long-standing drought in the state and the worsening Colorado River Crisis. I have worked as a citizen scientist on oil and gas issues since 2006 and in the past nine years that

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work has been amplified through my participation in Western Colorado Alliance's (WCA) oil and gas committee and my role as Chair of the oil/gas committee for Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC). I serve on the boards of both those organizations. It is that work that brings me before you today.

WORC and its member groups including WCA have a longstanding interest in federal oil and gas policy, and for over 35 years have actively engaged in advocacy in this area. Many of our members in both organizations live on lands overlying and neighboring federal, state, tribal, and privately owned oil and gas deposits, and experience numerous impacts due to oil and gas production. WORC is a regional network of eight grassroots community organizations with 39 local chapters and affiliates in seven states, including Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

**Background Detailing Changes Made During the Current Administration**

Our public lands are supposed to be managed for multiple uses. In Jackson County, Colorado – where I live — that means managing lands for uses including grazing, fish and wildlife, outdoor recreation, lands with wilderness characteristics and extractive industries including oil and gas energy. To meet the needs of future generations – places in nature to hunt and fish and recreate, healthy ecosystems and watersheds, increasingly scarce water resources and sustainable energy development — these lands must be managed to protect these irreplaceable resources, rather than to maximize short-term economic gain. Balancing these uses is both BLM's responsibility and authority.

Yet, that's all been flipped on its head over the past year and a half. The administration — working with like-minded members of Congress — has sought to enshrine oil, gas, and coal as the dominant use of our public lands. The language now used to describe our public lands as “assets on the federal balance sheet” ignores values other than dollars. In doing so, it has brushed aside any pretense of acknowledging the importance of other public lands uses, even going as far as [to describe](#) those who truly want our public lands managed for multiple uses – not just oil and gas development — as “illiterate.”

This is all exacerbated by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA). It introduced changes that were not widely-publicized or well-understood, but which are now sidelining the local communities and stakeholders who have the deepest connections to our public lands and who have the most to lose from hasty, ill-informed decision-making. These changes removed the fee previously charged to oil and gas companies to nominate a parcel for lease, opening the door again to speculative leasing. And once an oil and gas company nominates parcels that are fed/fed (federal minerals under federal surface) or fee/fed ('split estate': federal minerals under private surface) – and there are [currently over](#) 200 million acres available for leasing — BLM must blindly oblige by offering them at the next quarterly lease sale. So, under OBBBA, requests by private landowners, state fish and game agencies, county commissioners or other stakeholders to the BLM to delay or deny leasing in

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specific areas because of conflicts with other resources - such as a community's watershed or an area affected by recent wildfires as examples - are disregarded. Those of us close to the landscapes involved can truly sympathize with local BLM staff because the OBBBA basically ties their hands by eliminating their individual and organizational agency to carry out their authority and responsibility, managing BLM lands for multiple uses. Those staff members also understand that delaying any consideration of these conflicts to the permit to drill stage eliminates common sense decisions at the leasing stage about best use of each parcel.

Making matters worse: OBBBA slashes the revenue that states and local communities receive from public lands drilling. According to the non-partisan Taxpayers for Common Sense, American taxpayers [stand to lose](#) over \$630 million in revenue from post-OBBBA oil and gas leases, including more than \$72 million in Colorado because OBBBA reduced the federal royalty rate to a rate lower than that charged by most states. That lost revenue, which is now retained earnings lining the pockets of wealthy oil and gas executives and shareholders, could have been used to support our schools and maintain our roads. Thus, OBBBA is forcing oil and gas development upon communities — even communities that have perfectly valid concerns about how it will degrade key resources— while cutting the revenue needed to deal with the effects of that development.

Topping things off, the administration has announced that it plans to force communities — and American taxpayers more broadly — to pay for cleaning-up the messes left behind by oil and gas companies on public lands. How quickly have we forgotten that, just four and a half years ago, Congress was [forced to pass](#) a nearly \$5 billion bail-out for oil and gas companies that had walked-away from [millions of wells](#) across the country, leaving behind a toxic mess. And note that \$5 billion wasn't enough to plug and remediate all the orphan wells. Now, the administration has made it clear that it wants to roll-back [recent and long-overdue](#) bonding increases for oil and gas wells on public lands - increases that were adopted for the express purpose of ensuring that companies, not taxpayers, bear clean-up and reclamation costs.

This problem is not an abstract one for me. I live in North Park where the first oil field (McCallum) was opened a century ago, with the first wells drilled in the late 1920s. This legacy field, which encompasses federal and non-federal minerals, is home to a high density of shallow, vertical "stripper wells." A single company, KP Kaufmann (KPK), owns most of the sixty or so that are still operating out of the many hundreds that were previously drilled on BLM surface. Their business model involves buying low producing wells, like these in the McCallum Field. Most of the active wells produce less than two barrels of oil per day. These extremely marginal wells don't generate sufficient revenue to cover routine costs for safety and maintenance, let alone the costs of plugging and reclaiming the well sites.

The lack of a sufficient federal bond means that if a marginal company fails or just walks away, their wells likely won't be reclaimed for many years (if ever) while BLM attempts to get any prior lessees to pay for reclamation costs. This is, unfortunately, a practice so prevalent that there is [a name](#) for it: the "playbook."

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None of these changes, individually and collectively, are beneficial or healthy for western public lands and the communities that depend on their long-term well-being. Over the past two decades, the United States has become the world's [largest producer](#) of oil and gas.

**2025 Global oil production**



This achievement has spanned multiple administrations, including those of Presidents Obama and Biden. Yet, global geopolitical events are now illuminating the inherent flaws in making oil and gas development the “dominant” energy source in our country. We need a balanced approach to providing energy — and we need to stop treating oil, gas, and coal development as the highest and best use of our public lands.

It is against this backdrop that I raise the following concerns for these bills.

**Analysis and Position on H.R. 1555.**

***Analysis***

H.R. 1555, the Bureau of Land Management Mineral Spacing Act, amends the Mineral Leasing Act with a new subsection (r) that would certain exempt holders of split estate oil and gas leases from the requirement to obtain a federal application for permit to drill (APD) in certain circumstances. The legislation does not apply to “Indian Lands,” including Tribal trust lands, reservation lands, and lands owned by Tribes or individual Tribal members.

By eliminating the federal approval step, the legislation would effectively bypass application of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that would otherwise be triggered during the APD process. The APD process also enforces certain lease stipulations required by BLM regulation, including safety standards and the government’s collection of reclamation bonds.

Instead, drilling would be authorized via a state permit, which must be furnished to the Secretary 30 days before drilling commences, with no explicit federal approval required. This marks a shift from federal to state-led permitting for a large swath of the federal mineral estate. According to a BLM estimate from late 2024, over 4 million acres across the West fit this bill’s criteria, including

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1.5 million acres in North Dakota, 800,000 in Wyoming, 700,000 in New Mexico, and 600,000 in Colorado.

Split-estate scenarios arise when federally managed subsurface minerals underlie non-federal land — including land managed by states or owned by private citizens. H.R.1555 would apply when the exploration and production areas are conducted on non-federal surface estate and the subsurface mineral estate being accessed is less than 50% federal. In the absence of a federal permit, BLM would have no oversight on the operators' procedures, materials, equipment and processes on the pad, siting and construction of access roadways nor for final reclamation — only to ensure proper accountability, measurement, and reporting of production, and payment of royalties.

***Position***

H.R. 1555 is conceptually flawed, unworkable, and unnecessary. I urge all members of the Subcommittee to oppose its advancement for the following reasons:

**First, the legislation unacceptably circumvents critical site-specific analyses.**

Under current law, the federal drilling permit application process is the primary point at which site-specific agency analysis takes place. While there are processes at the resource management planning stage and there were processes (now eliminated) at the lease sale stage, the APD process is where the rubber really meets the road. Operators pay a \$12,850 APD processing fee, which helps cover the cost of this analysis. The process often includes landowner consultation, a period of stakeholder input, scientific and archaeological analysis and a final agency determination. The BLM, in concert with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, analyzes potential impacts of drilling on wildlife, groundwater, surface and subsurface resources, and — in consultation with an agency archaeologist — potential conflicts with cultural resources that may not be apparent prior to breaking ground.

H.R. 1555 would negate this holistic federal site-specific analysis for a significant portion of the federal mineral estate — cutting out landowners, the public, and allowing drilling to proceed without studying the consequences.

**Second, H.R. 1555 would remove BLM's mechanism to protect private surface above federal minerals.**

This legislation would impact thousands of split estate landowners throughout the West who own the surface of the land but not all of the minerals beneath their land. Private landowners rely on the consultation that is provided through the federal APD process to engage with lessees and agency representatives around the locations of wells, roads and facilities, raise concerns related to environmental impacts, and seek conditions of approval of the permit or changes to the reclamation plan.

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Landowners also rely on the federal government to protect their land. The Mineral Leasing Act requires BLM to “regulate all surface-disturbing activities conducted pursuant to any lease .. and determine reclamation and other actions as required in the interest of conservation of surface resources” (30 USC 226(g)). BLM’s [Gold Book](#) requires the agency to offer private surface owners above federal minerals “the same level of surface protection that the BLM provides on federal surface.”

This assurance is critical because the mineral estate is the dominant estate — those with mineral rights have priority over the surface — and private landowners who do not own the minerals beneath their land are largely powerless to stop irresponsible development on their land. While some landowners own at least some minerals beneath their property, which gives them more leverage to negotiate with lessees, many do not.

For generations, split estate landowners throughout the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana, the San Juan Basin in Colorado and New Mexico, and North Dakota’s Bakken formation have fought for stronger protections during the leasing, permitting, drilling, and reclamation process due to the conflicts that arise from the mineral estate being the dominant estate over the surface or land.

Split estate surface landowners over federal minerals have to negotiate directly with lessees and are limited to the protections provided in the Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916, which protects damages to crops and tangible improvements.

As a result, the federal permitting and environmental analysis process are the only mechanisms to consider how proposed plans of operations would affect the other resources on private land, including produced water impacts, and ranching, grazing and wildlife impacts. The federal permitting process also includes a Notice for Staking, Onsite Inspection, and the opportunity for exceptions, waivers or modifications to lease stipulations, which are all crucial and necessary steps that protect split estate landowners.

The legislation puts state permitting agencies in charge. These agencies do not have the same statutory obligation to protect private land, nor do they have the authority or resources to do so.

**Third, H.R. 1555 would eliminate BLM’s practical ability to require reclamation bonds, weakening the government’s ability to require or tailor them to well-specific situations.**

Pursuant to [43 C.F.R. § 3104](#), operators must purchase a reclamation bond covering their operations. This bond acts as collateral to ensure the operator pays to plug their well and reclaim the land when drilling operations cease. When operators go bankrupt or abandon their wells, the collateral kicks in to help pay for the cost of reclamation.

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Under existing procedures, operators must have adequate bonds prior to applying for a drilling permit. At the APD stage, if a bond has not been purchased or if it is inadequate, the BLM can withhold approval of the drilling permit pending a corrective measure by the operator.

Current minimum bonding rates are \$150,000 for an operator's wells lease-wide, or \$500,000 for all of an operator's wells in a given state. One can argue that even these minimum assurances are not enough to fully incentivize operators to clean up after themselves because these minimums almost always cover dozens — occasionally hundreds — of wells. According to the [Government Accountability Office](#), the cost of reclaiming a well — plugging it and returning the surface to a pre-drilling state — ranges from \$20,000 to \$145,000. Notably, P.L. 118-58 included \$4.7 billion to cover over a century of orphaned and abandoned oil and gas wells that dot our federal, state, and Tribal landscape. While this funding was needed to address an orphaned well crisis, it is also critical that reclamation and bonding rules and enforcement are *strengthened* — not weakened — in order to address the growing number of current wells that are marginally producing or idle, and at risk of being orphaned.

Because the APD process is the primary point when BLM verifies bond adequacy and can withhold approval pending corrective action, eliminating that process removes the government's most effective mechanism for ensuring adequate financial assurance before drilling begins. The onus must be on the proponents of this legislation to propose a solution that enables BLM to enforce bond adequacy to minimize taxpayer exposure to reclamation liabilities and environmental harms.

**Fourth, there is scant evidence of a system-wide permitting bottleneck, and H.R. 1555 is not necessary.**

Since January 2025, the BLM has approved over [6,000 drilling permits](#). As of the latest available data, there are 8,887 approved and ready-to-drill permits on the onshore federal oil and gas estate. In the last 10 years (FYs 2015-2024), [BLM has reported](#) that operators have drilled an average of just under 1,750 wells per year on the federal onshore oil and gas estate — with 2024 being the high water mark at 2,383. This existing inventory of approved, ready-to-drill permits can sustain a very high level of drilling activity well into the future.

**Finally, state permitting agencies are not an adequate substitute for federal oversight**

In state permitting, there is substitute for NEPA and there is no obligation to protect split estate surface owners. Uncertainties for both oil and gas operators and split estate surface owners are injected given the inconsistent protections across the federal mineral estate from state to state..

**Analysis of H.R. 5639, the Co-Location Energy Act**

H.R. 5639 would empower the Secretary of the Interior to authorize wind and solar developers to examine lands on federal energy leases — including oil, gas, and geothermal leases — to determine if those lands are suitable for utility-scale wind or solar development. The legislation also allows the

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Secretary to issue permits for such development. All analysis and permitting would be subject to the approval by the leaseholder.

The legislation would also direct the Secretary to consider applying existing categorical exclusions for oil, gas, and geothermal development on a given lease to activities related to wind and solar — including resource confirmation studies and infrastructure development. Lastly, H.R. 5639 directs the Secretary to promulgate a rule implementing the legislation.

It is true that our nation’s public lands hold vast wind and solar resource potential. It is also true that oil and gas leases cover an enormous portion of these lands: as of [the end of FY 2024](#), over 22 million acres were under lease to oil and gas operators, and 12.4 million of those acres were in production — meaning somewhere around 10 million acres are under lease and not producing oil or gas.

Although WORC and WCA do not have positions on this legislation, I think there may be some merit to this idea. However, the legislation needs more guardrails. With respect to solar, it should, at minimum, comport with the 2024 Western Solar Plan’s application and exclusion areas. The legislation could be further strengthened by explicitly limiting categorical exclusions only to areas deemed to be previously disturbed or degraded, or that are within reasonable proximity to existing or planned transmission corridors. These changes would help ensure the legislation minimizes the need for new infrastructure while avoiding lands with a high likelihood of resource and wildlife conflicts.

**Analysis of H.R. 7831, the License to Drill Act**

This legislation would reauthorize the Permit Processing Improvement Fund (PPIF) through FY 2037. The PPIF was created to address permitting backlogs at BLM. It authorizes BLM to collect an APD fee — currently \$12,850 per well — and reinvest it in field office and state staff on the ground who conduct NEPA analyses, engineering studies, and safety inspections. This helps avoid the longer-term uncertainty of congressional appropriations and ensures that the oil and gas permitting program is independently resourced and funded.

This legislation is noncontroversial and members of the Subcommittee should advance it.

**Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear and provide testimony on these bills. The enormous public outcry following recent efforts to sell-off our public lands underscore just how important public lands are to western communities. Much in the same vein, western communities do not need or want public lands managed principally for oil and gas development. There must be a balance – a real balance – that embraces long-term protections of key resources and uses including fish and wildlife, outdoor recreation, ranching. Managing for multiple uses requires critical discernment of the best use of our public lands as it considers leasing and development of all forms of energy.

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The approach of this administration – and, of late, Congress – has been far too one-sided. I look forward to the BLM returning to serious involvement of on-the-ground stakeholders in the west in decisions about the best use of our public lands including at the levels of policy, Resource Management Plans, management plans for species of concern and lease sales.