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Eddy County No. 1 in New Mexico for oil production

By Jonathan Smith / Carlsbad Current-Argus

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CARLSBAD — Step aside, Lea County.

According to recent data, Eddy County has surpassed Lea County as the top oil producing county in New Mexico. Eddy County produced 51.5 million barrels of oil in 2013, compared with Lea County's 42.4 million, according to data from the state's Oil Conservation Division.

"It's a privilege to have claimed that spot because it helps us continue to get taxes to help us keep running," said Eddy County Commission Chairman Tony Hernandez.

The title switch actually happened in 2012, when the county produced 44.1 millions barrels of oil to Lea County's 36 million. Lea has long been regarded as the state's top oil-producing county, but Eddy started to make gains in recent years.

Why the change? Advances in drilling and fracking methods, according to Wally Drangmeister, spokesman for the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association. Drangmeister said the underground formations in Eddy County allow for more access to these drilling techniques.

"I think it has to do with the high percentage of horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracking that is done in the county," Drangmeister said.

Oil tax revenue continues to be high revenue for Eddy County. Assistant County Manager Kenney Rayroux told the County Commission that oil and gas tax receipts are up \$3.2 million over the amount budgeted. And Eddy's oil production continues to rise. As of Friday, Eddy had 51 active wells and Lea had 31.

The increased production has had ripple effects on the greater economy. More oil and gas operations have led to more service companies bringing jobs to the county. Hernandez noted that many companies that serve the oil and gas industry are popping up on the south end of the county.

Success, however, hasn't been without its growing pains. Business owners in Carlsbad and Eddy County continue to voice concern about the availability of housing for employees. And keeping the state's oil and gas crown could heavily depend on housing more than the oil that is buried beneath the surface, Drangmeister said.

"Whoever gets ahead of the housing issues might be able to get ahead of the production," he said.

Concerns about road safety and infrastructure remain a hot topic. Dozens of crashes on oil field roads have unnerved some residents and prompted local officials to call for improvements to the area's roadways. The county hopes the addition of the West Loop Road could help mitigate some of the traffic concerns. The county hopes to begin construction on the road this year.