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Western Colorado Struggles as Energy Jobs Fade

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Matthew Staver for The New York Times

A gas well in the foreground and other equipment along a county road near Meeker, Colo. In a region rich in natural resources, the boom is over.

MEEKER, Colo. — The news of a nationwide energy boom is almost too much for people in this town built atop a sea of [oil](#) shale and [natural gas](#), where rusting tanks line the highways and ExxonMobil helped to finance the 4-H club's new community center.

Elsewhere — seemingly everywhere else but here, locals say — an oil and gas stampede is transforming towns from the green hills of western Pennsylvania to the plains of North Dakota and eastern Colorado, bringing a flood of money, jobs and attendant environmental concerns.

But here, in a region rich in natural resources, where oil and gas jobs form the bedrock of the local economy, the boom has dried up. Energy jobs have flowed to Wyoming, Texas and

Pennsylvania. Main Street businesses are struggling, and big new schools built to accommodate a surge of students from the last energy rush are now watching their enrollments dwindle.

“We’re sitting here dead,” said Shawn Bolton, a Republican county commissioner who runs a construction business serving oil and gas companies. Four years ago, he had 125 employees, most of them working here on the Western Slope of Colorado. Now, Mr. Bolton said, all but a handful of his 70 remaining employees are working out of state.



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Wendy Gutierrez runs a gift shop in Meeker.

Accidents of geology and swings of the market lie at the root of their woes. Crude oil is less common here, but natural gas is abundant, locked deep in the sandstone. But while oil prices have stayed high even as the American economy stumbles along, [natural gas prices](#) are sagging near all-time lows, largely because of reduced demand and a surge in supplies unlocked by the spread of hydraulic fracturing techniques.

And so, energy producers have pulled out of deep and remote gas fields here across the Piceance Basin, which covers an area larger than Connecticut. Officials said that four years ago, there were about 115 drilling rigs boring into the sandstone and shale formations around northwestern Colorado. Now, there are about 16.

Many residents and local officials blame the government for driving them off. They say overlapping layers of regulation and fees have thrown up excessive and profit-killing roadblocks to drilling on public lands, which make up as much as three-quarters of all terrain in some counties here.



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D. J. Ridgeway works at the family business, R&T Oilfield Services.

Aside from a few liberal ski towns and organic-farming communities, Colorado's western fringe is largely Republican, as red as the iron-rich plateaus skirting the horizon. In their dissatisfaction with the state of affairs, residents and officials offered ground-level echoes of the Republican attack against President Obama's energy policies. They said the government was stifling domestic production, and they supported efforts to streamline federal permitting to drill on public lands.

"It's a challenging job to begin with," said David Cesark, a vice president of Mesa Energy Partners, a small drilling company in Grand Junction that has four active wells in western Colorado. "But the feds are making it more difficult. It's like a pack of wild dogs that are constantly following you and nipping away at you."



Matthew Staver for The New York Times

Rebecca Gilbert is behind the counter at Meeker Drug.

There is an economic whiplash to it all — a vision of a boom-and-bust cycle that may offer a glimpse of the future for other corners of the country where energy exploration is a boost to land values and local government coffers.

In 2008, officials said, rental vacancy rates were less than 1 percent in Grand Junction, the largest city in western Colorado, and space was so tight that energy workers were living in hotels, squeezing out tourists who would come for rafting and biking. Restaurants desperate for workers offered signing bonuses of \$3,000. The surrounding county's unemployment rate was 3 percent. Today, it stands at 9.1 percent, compared with 7.8 percent statewide. Home foreclosures, falling across Colorado, are [rising here](#).

But the region is more resilient than it was during a devastating [downturn in 1982](#), set into motion when Exxon announced it was closing down an oil-shale project near Parachute, Colo., leaving thousands of people from oil crews and support companies out of work. About 24,000 people abandoned two of the hardest-hit counties over the next two years, according to a history by the Center of the American West, creating a string of modern-day ghost towns.

That calamity has not happened this time. Drilling has continued even during the downturn, and a new pipeline bound for the Pacific Northwest was completed last year. Officials say the regional economy is less reliant on oil and gas, and is bolstered by growing tourism as well as aviation, health care and green energy.

For all its energy problems, Rio Blanco County — which encompasses Meeker — has only a 6 percent unemployment rate. But that is sharply higher than the 2.8 percent jobless rate during the [2008 presidential elections](#), and Mr. Bolton, the county commissioner, said an exodus of workers and families made the economy look healthier on paper than it really was.

With workers coming and going so fluidly, it is difficult to say precisely how the area's population has changed in the past few years. But the Meeker School District reported that its enrollment fell by 8.5 percent from 2009 to 2011. And in the quiet streets of downtown Meeker, people said the town feels hollow.

“The world fell off the edge,” said Wendy Gutierrez, who runs a gift shop on Main Street.

Ms. Gutierrez said that her receipts had dropped by 35 percent over the past three years — about \$50,000 — and that she had been doing anything possible to bring in customers. A coffee shop in the back. Knitting classes. Dry cleaning. A tanning bed, even. Her staff has fallen to 3 from 11. “It's not coming back,” she said.

“It all died,” said D. J. Ridgeway, 30, the scion of a family of Colorado roughneckers who moved their oil-support business to Meeker from Wyoming in 2005. At its peak, the company had 20 employees, he said.

They hoped the region would snap back after energy prices rebounded following their steep decline in late 2008, but the recovery never came.

His brothers and father and most of their equipment have migrated to Pennsylvania while Mr. Ridgeway spends his workdays in a nearly vacant warehouse and tries to scrape together a bit of business finding generators and industrial supplies for drilling rigs.

“I’m the only one left,” Mr. Ridgeway said. He has stayed in town for the sake of his three school-age children, but said it was hard to justify his job anymore. “I love Meeker, but it’s getting hard to be here.”