

OPINION // OUTLOOK

# 'Energy sprawl' threatens Texas' wide-open spaces

By Joe Kiesecker and Michael Young | June 29, 2019 | Updated: June 29, 2019 4:21 p.m.



County Road 320 near Balmorhea State Park: The fracking boom, combined with enormous windmill farms, threaten West Texas' landscape and ecology.

Photo: Michael Ciaglo, Staff Photographer / Michael Ciaglo

The landscapes of West Texas, like much of the western United States, are iconic — home to working cowboys, open spaces and some of the most intact landscapes remaining on the North American continent. Core to the fabric of these lands are the fiercely independent people.

only dream about.

Yet as domestic and international energy usage continues to rise, energy development has found its way onto the American West's wide-open spaces. In far West Texas, people live above vast stores of oil and natural gas and on land rich in wind and solar energy potential. Much of the energy rights have already been acquired by energy companies, making this region the center for America's energy future.

The question: Will local communities have a say in the fate of their land?

To put the energy potential in perspective, the United States Geological Survey reports West Texas has "technically recoverable resources" of more than 45 billion barrels of oil and 281 trillion cubic feet of gas, enough to meet almost six years of total U.S. demand. As a state, Texas also has greater wind-generating capacity than all other states combined. It's a mix that delivers energy reliability and economic benefit to the entire country.

Energy reliability, however, comes at a price. It requires a large land area to support well drilling and its related oil and gas production equipment, including pipelines and pads, of course, but also wind turbines and solar panel installations.

Referred to as "energy sprawl," this demand for land could be more than twice the land used for urban and residential development in the past 50 years and is likely to be the largest source of land disturbance between now and 2040.

According to the World Wide Fund for Nature, this landscape is one of the most biologically diverse in the world, providing shelter and habitat for hundreds of plant, bird, reptile and mammal species, some of which are threatened and endangered. Numerous migrating birds rely on the Chihuahuan Desert for resting areas during journeys north and south. And the lack of rainfall makes restoration extremely difficult to achieve, if not done correctly or closely following the land disturbance.

Can intensive development and independent communities co-exist?  
Yes, they can, but only with a plan that all stakeholders can get behind.

Energy companies need to dovetail conservation practices directly into exploration activities. Large quantities of native seeds need to be available to restore fragile ecosystems. And most important, local citizens – both landowners and residents – need to have a say in land conservation and management plans adopted by energy developers. Diverse alliances will need to form and sustain collaborative discussions between the industry and people who are directly and indirectly affected by the impact of the diverse energy development expected in this region of West Texas.

Here's the bottom line: We live in a society that depends on reliable and affordable access to energy. As Texas and other regions of the U.S. continue to be focal points of energy development that benefit our nation, we need to gather together key stakeholders – industry, landowners, lease holders, environmentalists, business people,

The Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation recently announced an initiative, Respect Big Bend – a coalition that works directly with industry, landowners, scientists and community leaders to conduct an inclusive and transparent landscape-scale energy development and land conservation planning effort in the greater Big Bend region of far West Texas. The goals are simple: protect, mitigate, restore and set a precedent, creating a model for energy development that transcends the status quo.

During the current energy boom, land stewardship must be front and center in regional planning. This initiative is a step in the right direction.

Energy resources vital for economic activity can be produced without damaging the environmental resources vital for communities and wildlife. But land restoration will not happen by itself or by accident. It is a deliberate activity that requires forethought, collaboration and pooled resources.

*Kiesecker is lead scientist and director of Development by Design, The Nature Conservancy.*

*Young is associate director and senior research scientist at the Bureau of Economic Geology, University of Texas at Austin.*

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