

## Rural county officials meet with governor

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

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When challenged by commissioners from five eastern Colorado counties, Gov. John Hickenlooper conceded that the process for passing Senate Bill 252 on rural renewable energy in last year's Colorado Legislature was flawed.

He said he has told current legislative leadership that the legislative process must be fair and that legislation passed without all parties being allowed to participate will face a certain veto from him this year.

Representatives of the five rural counties that passed the secession advisory question last November met with Hickenlooper at the State Capitol Thursday, Feb. 6 to discuss issues behind that vote.

Trent Bushner, Yuma County commissioner, served as spokesman for county commissioners and others from Yuma, Washington, Cheyenne, Kit Carson and Phillips counties.

Phillips County Commissioners Harlan Stern and Joe Kinnie were in attendance along with county administrator Randy Schafer.

The group presented four major areas of concern to Hickenlooper, including renewable energy requirements, oil and gas regulations, gun control and transportation.

Mark Farnsworth, manager of Highline Electric Association, emphasized three major concerns with SB 252: additional monetary burden on a small membership to meet new standards, the possibility that the 2 percent cap would not allow companies to meet renewable energy requirements, and the potential of even more stringent future legislation.

Discussion focused on the process that appeared to ram the bill through from the 2013 Legislature to the governor's office without allowing input from affected electrical providers, despite the protests of a considerable number of rural Colorado entities and individuals.

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Hickenlooper responded that he had felt that whatever small step Colorado could take to minimize the state's effect on the climate needed to be taken.

Commissioner Bushner addressed past and pending oil and gas regulations, focusing on those presently before the Colorado Air Pollution Commission that would put new controls on methane emissions. If those regulations are passed, Colorado would be the first state in the nation to put such controls in place.

Bushner noted that three of the larger oil and gas companies in the state met with Air Pollution Control Division staff and proposed a set of regulations. He said that eastern Colorado has many smaller oil and gas producers, with a majority of wells being stripper wells with limited production.

While larger companies may more easily afford costly equipment requirements demanded by more stringent regulations, margins for small producers are much tighter and might result in abandoned wells.

Bushner said that oil and gas company managers indicate that Colorado, once one of the top two or three states to drill in, is now near the bottom in red tape and regulations, frustrating drilling efforts. Bushner noted that Yuma County had almost 60 percent of its assessed value from natural gas three years ago but dropped to 29 percent for 2014.

Commissioners pointed out that eastern Colorado is already in an attainment area that currently meets air pollution standards. While the Front Range appears to have the pollution issues, the regulations are proposed for the entire state.

Several in the group expressed displeasure over state regulations that cover the entire state. "One size does not fit all," even though the state Legislature does not recognize that.

Bushner compared one-day permits in Kansas with 90-day permits in Colorado, pointing out

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that the choice of where to drill is, therefore, simple for oil and gas companies to make.

Addressing gun control, Cheyenne County Commissioner Rod Pelton said that guns are a way of life in rural Colorado, and the U.S. Constitution guarantees that right. He expressed his feeling that the stringent laws passed in Colorado infringe on the people's rights to have and use guns.

Hickenlooper asked Pelton his opinion on required background checks, citing how many people with criminal records had already been prevented from getting weapons. Pelton answered that criminals will still find a way to get a weapon. Due to lack of time, magazine size was not addressed.

Bushner, who is co-chair of the Eastern Transportation Planning Region and attends State Transportation Advisory Committee meetings, addressed transportation, the group's fourth issue.

He explained the recent Department of Transportation Responsible Acceleration of Maintenance and Partnerships Program that allows local government to propose projects and provide matching money.

In all of eastern Colorado, Yuma County was the only successful applicant, he said, but RAMP circumvents priority projects already on tap in each of the transportation planning regions and many rural local governments cannot provide match money.

In other issues, Washington County Commissioner Terry Hart expressed frustration over the lack of FEMA funding for individual flooding losses last fall in his county.

After a 50-minute meeting with the governor, the group gave additional concerns to Cabinet members Commissioner of Agriculture John Salazar, Director of Natural Resources Mike King and Director of the Colorado Department of Local Affairs Reeves Brown.

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Members of the group reiterated that rural Colorado is disenfranchised, with no voice in Colorado government, and that rural Colorado is dictated to and ignored.

Phillips County Administrator Randy Schafer presented the 2013 Phillips County proposal that would change representation in the state House of Representatives from a population base to mirroring the U.S. Senate with representation by area or to one representative per county.

Attending the session were Yuma County Commissioners Dean Wingfield, Robin Wiley and Trent Bushner; Kit Carson County Commissioners Dave Gwyn, Dave Hornung and Gary Koop; Washington County Commissioner Terry Hart; Cheyenne County Commissioner Rod Pelton; and Phillips County Commissioners Harlan Stern and Joe Kinnie.

Also in attendance were Phillips County Administrator Randy Schafer, Highline Electric Association Manager Mark Farnsworth and Y-W Electric board member Stuart Travis.

The group also met briefly with Sen. Greg Brophy. Tracee Bentley, director of Legislative Affairs and Strategic Initiatives, coordinated the meeting with the governor at the request of Yuma County.