

Fair Play

Oil and Gas Development – A Community Perspective

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The community of Eagle Valley, Alberta, 120 kilometers (75 miles) northwest of Calgary in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, has recently published a unique handbook entitled *Fair Play*. The handbook was developed for the benefit of other communities in which oil and gas development, particularly that which involves H₂S (hydrogen sulfide), is prevalent. Ms. Kerry Lowe, an employee of Alberta Environment, assisted the community with the writing of the handbook as part of a research project for a masters of communications studies degree at the University of Calgary. In October of 1990, Ms. Lowe spoke at IRWA Chapter 48's monthly meeting and explained the background to the handbook as well as its key points and intent.

The residents of Eagle Valley are primarily farmers who have owned property in the area for a number of years. Although accustomed to oil and gas activity in general, an increase in sour gas (H₂S) development over approximately the last five years has generated enough concern within the community that the idea for *Fair Play* was conceived. Areas of specific concern include the drilling and completing of sour gas wells and the eventual pipeline gathering system. Due to the potentially lethal characteristics of sour gas and the noxious odors that can be associated with release of gas to atmosphere, production of such gases anywhere near a population base can lead to varying degrees of anxiety, both real and perceived.

The advice provided in the handbook is based on what the residents of Eagle Valley believe to be integral to building an effective two-way dialogue with the oil and gas industry. Inasmuch as the residents played a large part in writing the handbook, they feel a particular affinity to it and

are proud to share their experience with other rural communities. The advice which is given in *Fair Play* includes the following:

1. Talk to your neighbors and stick together
 - residents are encouraged to get together to discuss how development plans can affect the entire community and acquire advice from those with prior experience in such matters
 - the company(ies) should be asked to allow time for the community to discuss what is fair
2. Stand up to the company
 - landowners are encouraged to include in any agreement with the company all of those items which

they consider to be important including the opportunity to repair any damages caused by the company's activities at the company's expense

- landowners are further encouraged to request an actual company employee to deal with rather than a contract representative/broker
3. Be reasonable and cooperative
 - residents are encouraged to ensure that they have good reasons for their demands and to assist in improving the relationship between the company and the community
 4. Get involved in the emergency response plan

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- an integral facet of sour gas development is the Emergency Response Plan (ERP), an evacuation procedure put into effect wherever sour gas wells are drilled near any type of population base
 - residents are encouraged to become qualified in safety training in order to act as liaison between the company and the community at large. It is felt that local representatives may have special knowledge about health problems of their neighbors, who in the community may need evacuation assistance as well as where rural residents may be at any given time
5. Keep an eye on the company
- landowners and residents are encouraged to keep an active listing of both company and government contacts. They are also encouraged to maintain records of baseline data (i.e., water wells) and any incidents which may occur
6. Obtain information and stay informed
- landowners and residents are encouraged to stay informed in order to become more intelligently involved with the company
7. Expect that there will be both negative and positive impacts felt in your community
- in the interview process preliminary to the handbook being published, it became readily evident that both negative and positive impacts were perceived by members of the community. Examples of negative impacts are such things as noise, traffic and the possible devaluation of surrounding properties. Positive impacts include predominantly economic benefits, both individual and collective

In conclusion, the residents of Eagle Valley had a number of comments which they wished to pass on

to industry, including that company representatives should assume a more respectful attitude and approach toward rural residents. In addition, they indicated that ongoing communication with company representatives is appreciated for both general information as well as knowledge regarding who is coming and going on their property. Companies are commended for their efforts in improving technology and safety procedures and are further encouraged to more fully incorporate local citizens in the liaison process between industry and the community at large.

The goal of the overall process is to establish a healthy, open and cooperative relationship between industry and the communities in which it operates. This philosophy is not confined to sour gas development northwest of Calgary, but is prevalent wherever people are impacted by industry activity. 

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