

FARMINGTON DAILY TIMES, NM EDITORIAL

Lack of regulation hurts everybody

The stories come from throughout the Four Corners.

A landowner buys a parcel of land with the intent of building a dream home. Then the oil and gas company comes knocking. Below that land, the company owns the mineral rights, and state and federal law says they can drill, no matter how much the landowner might not want it.

Lawyers are hired, harsh words are exchanged, accusations fly.

It's really all decided. The company has a right to drill and develop its lease. The landowner can only hope to arrange a settlement that somehow takes the edge off the sting of having a well location next door for a decade or two.

For the most part, oil and gas companies, to their credit, try hard to solve these problems to the landowner's satisfaction. For some landowners, nothing will make them happy except for the company deciding not to drill.

The problem isn't the oil and gas companies wanting to develop their leases. Nor is it the landowner wanting to protect their land.

The problem is in the fact that the leases have the teeth of federal law behind them and it would be very difficult to change that.

In the end, both sides end up spending way too much time and money arguing over details that do little to change the eventual fact that a well will be drilled.

The landowner feels like he's been wronged by the company, and the company squanders precious profits trying to satisfy the landowner.

Education is about the only thing that's going to keep this problem from becoming even more common in the years to come. An estimated 12,500 wells are expected to be drilled in the coming years in this area, and many of those will be on private land with federal leases beneath the surface.

Anyone looking to buy a home anywhere, but particularly a larger chunk of land in the county, should do some investigation beforehand.

Who owns the lease? What is the probability the lease will be developed? These are important questions a landowner should be asking before putting a life's savings into a piece of property.

At the same time, drilling companies have to understand that, despite having a right to

drill, making a landowner happy, when possible, goes a long way toward making their business run smoother.

San Juan County, despite our growth, is still made up of small communities, and word travels fast when a landowner feels they've gotten the shaft. Each story that gets around makes other landowners that much more willing to fight when it's their turn to deal with the situation.