

## Osage County residents complain about fumes

by Sarah Terry-Cobo

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FORAKER – Melvin Reed has a problem with dangerous gas venting near his property. Hydrogen sulfide gas escapes from oil and gas wells on his land and his neighbor's property. If he lived in any other county in the state, the Oklahoma Corporation Commission would address the situation.

But Reed lives in Osage County, where the Bureau of Indian Affairs is responsible for regulating drilling operations. Landowners say the agency isn't responding to their complaints.

Reed is one of dozens of Osage County cattlemen who have had oil and gas wells pollute the soil, air and water. He said hydrogen sulfide gas, which smells like rotten eggs, frequently wafts from nearby wells and makes him and his family sick. At high enough concentrations, the gas is deadly.

One day he and his son, Jason, were overcome with nausea and [headaches](#) while branding cattle. Jason Reed's heart raced and he was short of breath; he drove to the emergency room in nearby Pawhuska. Melvin Reed said he contacted the BIA, but didn't get a response.

"We have got to get better control of our environment: the land, the air and the water," Reed said. "We are not getting it done here in Osage County."

Jeff Henry agreed with Reed. Henry is the president of the Osage County Cattlemen's Association. He said he has heard similar environmental complaints from dozens of his members. Speaking at a Society for Range Management Native American forum at the [Cox](#) Convention Center on Thursday, he said people are selling their ranches and moving out of the area.

"We really can sum up landowners' attitudes with one word: frustration," Henry said. "We can't get anything done; it's been that way forever."

Osage County has been plagued with problems from crude oil spills and land scarred from highly salty oil-field wastewater for decades. In recent years, as more operators drill horizontally, more hydrogen sulfide gas rises to the surface with the petroleum. In one slide of the presentations, Henry showed a photo of a well site with a flare.

"That is literally a pipe in the ground from the wellhead and a match thrown in it," he said.

The wind can easily blow down the flaming pipe, with it being supported only by guy wires, he said. There isn't anything in the code of federal regulations that addresses hydrogen sulfide gas, Henry said.

In Oklahoma's other 76 counties, the OCC regulates hydrogen sulfide gas. Those wells are required to have flares with automatic igniters to properly burn the gas. Wayne Wright, field operations manager for the agency, said a driller must find out if there is a history of hydrogen sulfide gas in the rock formation. Then the operator has to [submit](#) contingency plans for flaring the gas during drilling and production.

If the OCC receives a complaint of a rotten egg smell, an inspector visits the well site, wearing a hydrogen sulfide meter. The meter sounds an alarm when the gas exceeds 10 parts per million. Though someone can safely work for eight hours exposed to 10 ppm of hydrogen sulfide, people can usually smell it at 0.2 ppm, Wright said. When it reaches above 100 ppm, a field inspector is required to wear protective equipment.

Skylar McElhaney, spokeswoman with the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality, said the agency responded to eight Osage County hydrogen sulfide complaints in 2012. On Wednesday the DEQ responded to one complaint there that is still under investigation. In several of the closed cases, residents complained of eye and throat irritation. In several instances, DEQ staff didn't detect hydrogen sulfide gas. In one instance, DEQ investigator Brad Flaming measured hydrogen sulfide gas levels fluctuating between 1.8 ppm and 3.0 ppm.

Osage County is home to the largest continuous tallgrass prairie. As the wind blows, long strands of forage bend like flowing waves. The strong wind helps dissipate the dangerous gas.

In one report, DEQ investigator Mark Bersche wrote that a resident was in contact with Republican U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn's office to help with the problem.

Coburn spokesman Aaron Fobes said the senator is aware of the issue and that both his field and Washington, D.C., staffs are working with constituents to understand the problem.

"It has morphed from mineral management issues, to people contacting him about the hydrogen sulfide," Fobes said. "That has been more recent than the other mineral management issues, and the hydrogen sulfide issue is still developing."

Nedra Darling, spokeswoman with the BIA, did not respond by publication time to multiple requests for a telephone interview.

Robert Jackman, an independent oil and gas producer in Osage County, agreed with Henry and Reed. Because the BIA doesn't have many regulations and doesn't enforce pollution requirements, the air pollution has become a public health problem, he said. There are some operators that report the hydrogen sulfide gas when they smell it, Jackman said.

"There are real smart operators; the minute they know they have a well with H<sub>2</sub>S, they take proper safety precautions and wear the right equipment," he said. "Then you get the sloppy operators that try to minimize it; that is where the problem is."

Reed said the BIA has to take control of the situation, because the air pollution is affecting people and wildlife.

"I know we have to have the oil," Reed said. "I'm not against the oil production. But we need to do it right, going down the road. But it's not being done here."

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