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**"There is no hope for the satisfied man."**
*Post founder, Frederick G. Bonfils, 1861-1933*



**Energy secretary nominee**

# *Coloradan Chris Wright and the real cost of our energy choices*

**By Mark Brownstein**
*Guest Commentary*

Chris Wright, who has been nominated by President-elect Trump to be the new energy secretary, often speaks eloquently about the benefits of fossil fuels. And he's right: They have been central to building our economy. But Wright rarely talks about the costs that oil, gas and coal impose on us — trade-offs we can no longer afford to ignore.

The reality is that fossil fuels produce millions of tons of pollution, which has led to higher global temperatures, extreme heat, stronger storms, drought and other impacts. The air pollution they produce also causes heart and lung disease and other health problems that cut short the lives of 6 million people a year around the world. And the use of fossil fuels to produce plastics and chemicals has contributed to the creation of "cancer alleys" where these industries are concentrated.

All of this does not mean we can stop using oil and gas tomorrow. And it doesn't mean we should dismiss the need for accessible, abundant and affordable energy for all. But it does mean we need to continue investing in cleaner sources of energy, while reducing the pollution from the production, transportation and use of fossil fuels we use today.

The good news is that our choices are growing. Solar energy is 90% cheaper than it was a decade ago and is the fastest-growing source of new energy on the planet.

Wind power is 70% cheaper and a major source of electricity in places such as Texas, Iowa and Kansas. In Colorado, one-third of the electricity is provided by wind and solar, and it's a top state for wind energy jobs.

Innovations in nuclear power, geothermal, hydrogen and advanced biofuels can help grow our economy, if developed smartly.

We also can produce traditional energy more cleanly. Lost natural gas — methane from venting, flaring and leaking — is wasting America's energy resources and adding to our climate and air pollution problems.

In the U.S. alone, we waste enough methane to meet the annual needs of more than 12 million households. Some oil and gas companies, big and small, have committed to reducing their methane pollution, and they're making progress.

But if the goal is abundant, affordable and clean energy, why should any operator be allowed to waste our nation's resources when we have the solutions?

The same is true about oil or gas wells that are no longer productive, which must be properly closed and cleaned up. In the United States, there are as many as 1.5 million inactive, unplugged oil and gas wells with no effective ownership stretching over 36 states. There are more than 1,000 of these sites in Colorado. They effectively have been abandoned over the past 150 years. Many are slowly, steadily leaking pollution into our air and water.

And of the 1 million or so currently active wells, the majority are low-producing or nonproductive. If history is any guide, hundreds of thousands of these will become orphaned as well. It will take potentially hundreds of billions of dollars to responsibly close existing and likely future orphan oil and gas wells across the United States. To date, industry has put aside pennies on the dollar at best to deal with this problem — their problem — sticking taxpayers with the rest. This, too, is a problem that can and must solved.

As the CEO of a large oil and gas services company, Chris Wright has the luxury of focusing solely on what's in his shareholders' interest. But as U.S. secretary of energy, Wright assumes responsibility to act in our interest.

At his confirmation hearing, Wright said he recognized the need to make "faster progress" on climate change and the need for "American leadership in this area." I hope these were more than just words to win a smooth confirmation. With all the affordable and clean options to meet our energy needs, if Chris Wright is confirmed he should work to leave a better and healthier world for our children and grandchildren.

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