

Prairie Talks opens Bakken discussion

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Tim Chapman - Tribune Editor , Pierce County Tribune

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The filmmaker of a soon-to-be-released documentary on the Bakken oil boom shared his work and thoughts on the topic at Prairie Talks on Sept. 7.

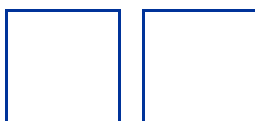
Hettinger native Todd Melby shared audio from his multimedia website blackgoldboom.com, and took questions from an audience of about 90 at Prairie Village Museum's Sandven building. Melby was joined by New Town area rancher Marty Young Bear, a subject in one of Melby's 62 radio stories, 11 YouTube videos and one interactive documentary on oil country.

Melby's work includes human-interest audio and video stories on oil workers, women in the Bakken and people displaced by the astronomical rent prices in Williston. His stories of the Bakken will be told in a documentary to air on Prairie Public next year.

Article Photos



Tim Chapman/PCT



Melby played a short radio story on a woman from Tennessee who moved to the Watford City area and set up a mobile kitchen. The woman describes the consistent stream of business she gets by setting up along U.S. 85.

She even deems the road the "Highway of Hope."

"They all got a story and they all got dreams," she said.

Melby also shared statistics and his concerns with the oil boom. Lack of infrastructure in the affected western North Dakota towns has been a major issue. Melby said there were about 47,000 jobs in the Bakken counties before the boom and about 95,000 now. On average, people in the area made \$724 per week before the boom, but the number has jumped to \$1,290.

Melby pointed out safety differences between the oil industry in North Dakota and that in Texas, which is the only state producing more.

In Texas, just 1 percent of the natural gas in the oil there is flared. In North Dakota, 30 percent is flared off at a loss of \$1 billion per year, according to Melby. The state has committed to decreasing that number to 10 percent by 2020.

Melby also is concerned about the amount of carbon dioxide being released in the air, estimated at 6 million tons of carbon dioxide per month.

"I do feel like the discussion is opening up," Melby said. "The problems are becoming apparent and people want to talk about it."

Melby, who owns mineral rights and may benefit financially from the boom, questioned why North Dakota legislators haven't mandated the removal of highly flammable properties of crude oil. Texas takes ethane, propane and butane out of its oil before it is shipped. Bakken crude in a derailed train killed more than 40 people in Quebec, Canada, and another train went down near Casselton earlier this year.

The filmmaker discussed the positive angles of the oil industry, which employs many people from areas of the country with significantly lower wages. One side effect of the male-dominated Bakken region is safety for women. Rape and assault have grown in Bakken counties and Melby's site includes a story of a woman, who moved to Watford City. She carries a gun and has a host of weapons and a boxer dog in her car at all times.

The website includes a section called Your Voice, which allows people in the oil field to share their experiences.

One poster through facebook said: "For the first time in our married life my husband and I are able to survive and be comfortable. I am able to stay home with my kids and I love that."

Another reads: "The trash that has come here. They are a bunch of slob. Throw all their garbage everywhere, committing all the crimes, and they call Williston a wasteland. Well, it wasn't till they got here. Take your trash and go back to your own home."

Young Bear spoke at the event of stewardship of the environment and how oil has affected the Three Affiliated Tribes. He expressed concern with lack of regulation and encouraged audience members to reconsider their consumption.

"We're so dependent on oil, gas and the electricity we have," Young Bear said. "We have to do things more in line with nature. ... We need to take care of the earth. If we don't, nature will take care of itself."