

WBR ARTICLE

Likwartz surprised by pace of CBM development

By Brodie Farquhar

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CASPER - In the January edition of the Wyoming Business Report, Don Likwartz gave an exit interview as he wrapped up 11 years at the helm of the Wyoming Oil & Gas Conservation Commission, as supervisor of the state agency that oversees the state oil and gas industry. In that wide-ranging interview, he said he was surprised by the pace of coal-bed methane development in Wyoming, but pleased by his agency's response.

His last day was the day after New Year's Day, 2009.

Likwartz has been the Commission's staff director or supervisor during a period of explosive growth.

"Coalbed methane surprised me," Likwartz said. "There was no way to forecast the growth we saw." Probably the most intense period was 1999 to 2001, when the CBM industry grew 500 percent, mostly in the Powder River Basin. The basin is filled with coal beds at varying depths, and the coal beds were laden with methane gas, which could be tapped, captured and pipelined off to natural gas markets when surrounding waters were pumped away, releasing the trapped gas. The CBM industry didn't need the big, expensive oil and gas drilling rigs - a simple water-drilling rig would do, and dozens were pressed into service. Soon, thousands and then millions of gallons of salt and mineral-laden water was spilling down ephemeral creek beds, releasing billions of cubic feet of methane gas.

"The train kept going faster and faster," said Likwartz, who counts himself fortunate that he talked then-Gov. Jim Geringer into letting him hire another five inspectors.

In hindsight, and if Likwartz had had a crystal ball handy back in 1998, he'd liked to have been better prepared when the CBM play got started. "I wish we could have lined up the safety rules and equipment earlier, educate (the community) quicker and that we'd gotten ahead and staffed up," he said.