

Governing Unconventional Legacies: Lessons from the Coalbed Methane Boom in Wyoming¹

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Abstract: Surface reclamation is a critical feature in the legacies of unconventional energy development. U.S. legal frameworks are in place to govern reclamation, but vary widely by state. While it is too early in the development cycle to assess the status of shale gas legacies, there are instructive case studies that draw attention to the challenges of governing reclamation. This paper explores land reclamation outcomes of the coalbed methane gas boom in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and the ensuing issue of widespread well abandonment. We argue that the challenges associated with coalbed methane reclamation in the Powder River Basin track closely with what can be expected in the context of shale gas governance. Drawing on an extensive review of scientific literature on reclamation, policy analysis, and stakeholder interviews, we argue and specifically identify three key factors that have interfered with the effective definition, regulation and implementation of coalbed methane reclamation: (1) the absence of clear guidance from the scientific literature about what constitutes successful reclamation; (2) the complexity of both the jurisdictional environment and the oil and gas sector in the coalbed methane space; and (3) a lack of political will in the state of Wyoming to engage in pre-emptive environmental regulation. This paper aims to explore how these factors coalesce to make implementation of effective reclamation a highly complex governance challenge.

Key words: reclamation policy, coalbed methane, Wyoming

1. Oral paper presented at the 2017 National Meeting of the American Society of Mining and Reclamation, Morgantown, WV: *What's Next for Reclamation?* April 9 - 13, 2017.

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