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WEEKEND EDITION

Stogner aims to be voice of reason for energy industry

By Mella McEwen STAFF WRITER



Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer Lawyer Sarah Stogner talks about improperly plugged wells, April 25 near Monahans.



Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer Lawyer Sarah Stogner takes photos of contractors for Walsh & Watts as they replug a well that had failed, April 25 near Monahans.

Attorney Sarah Stogner has spent the last 14 years working with energy businesses to manage risk.

The former Railroad Commission candidate is also working to develop smart contracts and utilize block chain technology to avoid legal issues.

“I graduated from Louisiana State University Law School in 2008, joined a big law firm, then joined a smaller law firm, then went out on my own in 2020,” she told Grant Swartzwelder, president of OTA Environmental Solutions, during OTA’s monthly Oilfield Strong online presentation.

She went out on her own because “I saw a need for legal services that weren’t billed by the hour of with contingency fees. Smaller operators, smaller service companies are trying to do the right thing, trying to bring energy to the world, get paid, get insurance and get paid and get on with their lives.”

Stogner said she found she likes what she called preventative stuff, avoiding problems. Her focus changed when she moved to a cattle ranch in the summer of 2021 and discovered an old well that had been plugged that came unplugged and began spewing brine. She has since discovered there is a network of old wells that were believed plugged that have come unplugged and begun spewing brine and other fluids.

“We have all this technology coming, let’s prepare to use it so we have the data to know what happened and not just who has the most-clever lawyers filing sneaky briefs,” she said.

The industry’s safety culture, she said, is missing the forest for the trees. “Yes everyone wants to go home with all their fingers and toes, but when they’re more worried about steel-toed boots than subsurface crossflow, priorities are out of whack,” she said.

The Permian Basin has hundreds of thousands of wells, many with significant integrity issues, she warned, and the inundation of produced water could only compound the issue.

It may look fine at the surface, she said, “but as soon as you dig down a few feet, the surface casing is rotten and actively leaking below ground. I thought about 25% would be leaking when I started, but I’ve excavated 100 wells and have not found one that was actually properly plugged.”

There are regulations overseeing the proper abandonment of wells, she acknowledged, but what is needed is stricter enforcement. She also called for the creation of a fund funded by every supermajor to help address the issue.

“I think most of this is a supermajor problem,” she said. “These are old wells Gulf Oil drilled, Panamerica drilled, it’s legacy stuff, and what I’m finding is when they started having problems in the field, instead of reporting it to the regulators and fixing the problems, they dumped it on the smaller guys.”

The good news is, she said, is that the industry has the technology and the rocks to allow the US to be energy independent for the next 200 years. She also has hope for nuclear energy, for hydrogen energy. Oil and natural gas will continue to be part of the mix, but only part, she said.

Her end goal, she told Swartzwelder, is for there to be a healthy, vibrant oil and gas industry.

“I understand as an industry we have been bad about explaining to the world what we do and why they need us. We understand modern day life relies on hydrocarbons so we’ve had this bravado of ‘We don’t care if you don’t like us, you need us, we’re indispensable.’ That doesn’t work anymore. We’re under attack. Politicians and companies that were 10 years ago saying climate change was a hoax are now saying, ‘Yes, we need to sequester carbon and give carbon credits and put solar panels in places where they don’t have electricity and never drill over here.’ There’s insanity on all levels from both sides. I’m trying to be a voice of reason and knowledge,” she said.