Energy Development
In the North Fork Valley:
COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

Report by Weise Consulting
November 2020

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Graphic design by Andrew Sternard

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Kevin Kruse for research and development of survey questions. David Inouye for review and copy editing. The many local organizations who assisted with distribution of the survey and volunteers who conducted phone surveys.

The Energy Development in the North Fork Valley Survey was made possible in part by a grant from the West Elk Community Fund.
Executive Summary:

The North Fork Valley Energy Survey conducted in 2020 is the first comprehensive survey conducted in Delta County that focused on the economic, social, and environmental impacts of energy development. With 325 respondents, 3.25% of the North Fork Valley population and 4.4% of eligible voters, the response rate far exceeded the Delta County response rate on the Master Plan and the Land Use Code Revision of less than 1%.

Survey topics included the following: (a) attitudes towards fossil fuel extraction and renewable energy, including the role of the government; (b) climate and action; (c) economic and social outlooks of the North Fork Valley (NFV); and (d) role of the community and elected public officials. Responses consistently reflected priority concern for the health of the community, the environment, and expectation of responsibility by a County to support a transition to a renewable energy economy and climate-conscious future.

When asked about new energy jobs, 91% of respondents indicated they want renewable energy jobs to stabilize climate and positively impact water quantity and quality, and air quality, compared with 4% wanting fossil fuel energy industry jobs, even if the impact of such fossil fuel energy industry jobs may degrade the environment, water quantity and quality, and air quality.

With regards to extractive industry activity, 93% of participants responded that they do not support new oil and gas developments in the NFV. Ninety-five percent of participants do not believe that coal and natural gas extraction are necessary for economic development and jobs. More than 60% of participants believe that the oil and gas industry negatively affects aspects of NFV lifestyle, including the arts, agriculture, transition to a clean energy economy, tourism, property values, public health and environmental quality. When asked about climate action, 92% of participants expressed support for the establishment of a Delta County climate action plan.

When asked what respondents were most hopeful about regarding the future of the NFV, only two respondents mentioned energy extraction. All other respondents emphasized regional qualities related to sustainability, agriculture, healthy lifestyles, and innovative business opportunities. Ninety-two percent of respondents expressed that they do not trust that the current elected officials in Delta County are working to maintain a healthy lifestyle and environment for the community. Further, 96% of participants believe that the community needs more representation in all county decisions pertaining to energy development.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS:

- **91%** Want renewable energy jobs
- **4%** Want fossil fuel energy industry jobs
- **93%** Do not support new oil and gas developments in the NFV.
- **95%** Do not believe that coal and natural gas extraction are necessary for economic development and jobs
- **60%+** Participants believe that the oil and gas industry negatively affects the community
- **92%** Support the establishment of a Delta County climate action plan
The results of this survey serve as a strong refutation of the county’s consistent staunch support for new oil and gas drilling in the region. A clear message has been given by a clear majority of survey respondents that the future for economic development in the region depends on industries that represent healthy, sustainable practices, and not those that contribute to air and water pollution. Accordingly, the report recommends that the County government should conduct comprehensive economic studies that consider the impacts by and to each of: a) established industries, b) emerging industries that are relatively younger and presently experiencing growth in the county, and c) those other industries that may continue to supplement the economy on a sustainable, lasting basis, including and particularly, while the county considers further expansion of fossil fuel development.

The following report delves into details of the survey methodology, findings, and offers recommendations for how elected officials and community leaders should incorporate the information into their decision making.
Introduction:

The North Fork Valley (or “NFV”) is a region on the western slope of Colorado comprising approximately 200 square miles, of which approximately 55% are public lands. The North Fork Valley includes the three towns of Crawford, Hotchkiss and Paonia, located in Delta County. The NFV shares a watershed with Gunnison County. The region has had a long history with fossil fuel energy production, particularly coal mining. Since 2013, two of the three major coal mines in the region have been shuttered, and prior to that, NFV’s history includes several boom-and-bust periods that often accompany resource extraction.

21st Century U.S. energy policy, including a renewed emphasis on continued fossil fuel development by the Trump Administration, has brought a spotlight to this region’s Mancos Shale, identified by the US Geological Survey as the 2nd largest oil and gas reserve in the country. In 2016, over 90% of the public land in this area was designated for oil and gas extraction through hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. Support for this proposed fracking activity has been expressed with unanimous enthusiasm by the three County Commissioners representing Delta County. Despite overwhelming public opposition at public hearings and in public comments at both the county and federal level to fracking and new and expanded natural gas extraction in the North Fork Valley, Delta County Commissioners have made public representations claiming that a “silent majority” of Delta county residents support this industry and proposals for new and expanded development. However, verifiable data backing these representations has been absent.

Many NFV residents have expressed concern that this support by the Commissioners is out of touch with the transition that has been occurring in the NFV away from reliance on an extractive economy, and instead toward more sustainable and tourism-focused industries of organic farming, wine and art, outdoor recreation destination, and clean and renewable energy. There is also concern that drilling for more fossil fuels is out of touch with the State of Colorado's more recent climate change goals for reducing the state’s greenhouse gas footprint.

While a number of economic development studies have been conducted in the North Fork Valley since 2014, there has been no comprehensive survey of NFV residents to assess their perception of the economic, social and environmental impacts of energy development in the Valley. The previous economic development surveys were conducted prior to the coal mine closures that have recently occurred, and were made in a period when the demographic representation of the NFV was more economically reliant on those mines. To address the region’s current demographic representation and this perceived gap in public outreach, the nonprofit organization Citizens for Healthy Community conducted a survey in the Spring of 2020 to understand better the current outlook toward resource extraction in the region. The goal of the survey was to collect meaningful data from the frontline community of NFV residents concerning their sentiments toward proposed energy development in the NFV, in particular, oil and gas development.

This report summarizes the findings from the survey.
Survey Background:

The survey is titled “Energy Development In The North Fork Valley” and was conducted from February 10, 2020 to April 8, 2020 (referred to herein as the “Survey”). According to the organizing entity, Citizens for Healthy Community, the survey was drafted in consultation with several community organizations, in addition to individuals and groups with experience developing surveys. The survey consists of 37 questions and took an average of 10 minutes for survey participants to complete. Participants for the survey were invited through weekly ads in the High Country Shopper in February and March, a full-page ad in the North Fork Merchant Herald in February, a public service announcement on KVNF, and a phone bank was established in March by volunteers to reach people directly. Promotion of the Survey to encourage participation was also made through the email distribution lists and social media of several community organizations, including the West Slope Conservation Center, The Learning Council, Citizens for a Healthy Community, and the Valley Organic Growers Association. In addition, Survey fliers were posted in popular locations in Paonia, Crawford and Hotchkiss. With 325 respondents, 3.25% of the North Fork Valley population and 4.4% of eligible voters, the response rate far exceeded the Delta County response rate on the Master Plan and the Land Use Code Revision of less than 1%.

The description of the Survey provided to participants is included below:

*The North Fork Valley has had a long history with diversified energy production. It, along with many other rural communities, has experienced the booms and busts that comes with the energy industry and resource extraction. A global, national, and regional shift in energy supply and demand is taking place, combined with concerns around stable economic development and climate change. This requires a closer look at the long-term impacts of decisions made today regarding energy development in the North Fork Valley.*

*A comprehensive survey on the pros and cons of energy development in the North Fork Valley has not been conducted.* The goal of this survey is to reach the widest cross-section of North Fork Valley residents and to collect comprehensive, meaningful and actionable data on the economic, lifestyle, and environmental impact of energy development in the North Fork Valley. [Click here to take the survey and share it with others.](#)
Survey Findings:

SURVEY RESPONDENTS.

A total of 361 people responded to the Survey. Of these, 36 people were disqualified for lack of residency in the NFV. Nine others who identified as prospective residents, completed a shortened number of survey questions to understand their concerns and interests.

Approximately 70% of respondents who identified as current NFV residents reside in the town or surrounding unincorporated area of Paonia; 22% as residents of the town or surrounding unincorporated area of Hotchkiss, and 6% as residents of the town or surrounding unincorporated area of Crawford. Of the 325 remaining survey participants who identified as current residents, 298 completed the entire NFV Survey and provided responses to most or all of the questions, which represents a 92% completion rate. Of the approximately 6900 registered voters in the NFV this representation is an approximate 4.4% response rate of voters.

For convenience, the complete group of 298 survey participants who identified as current residents of the NFV are referred to as “respondents”.

Fifty-three percent of respondents have lived in the NFV over ten years, and 47% fewer than ten years, and notably 50% are age 65 or older. See Figure 1. The next largest age group includes 29% of respondents who are between the ages of 45 and 64. 15% are aged between 25 and 44, and fewer than 6% are under the age of 24.

Figure 1
How long have you lived in the North Fork Region

Nearly an equal number of participants responded as being business owners, 49%, while the remaining 51% did not identify as business owners.

Of the participants who responded to the question of whether they own water rights in the NFV, 68% claimed they do, and 32% do not. Of those who answered whether they are property owners or not, 90% claimed they are, and 10% are not. Of those who responded to the question of whether a conservation easement exists where they live, 13% claimed there is and 87% responded there is not. Of the 263 who responded to the question of whether they owned mineral rights on their property, 30% claimed they do, 32% claimed they do not, and 38% did not know.

71% of the participants have at least a 4-year or post-graduate degree. 26% have 2-year degrees or no degrees. 3% chose not to answer.
Just over half of participants responded to the question asking for political party affiliation. Of these, 21% preferred not to say, 45% identified as Registered Democrats, 28% as Registered Independents, and 3% as Registered Republicans.

GOVERNMENT TREATMENT OF THE OIL & GAS INDUSTRY.

The majority of respondents believe that oil and gas companies should not be treated differently than other industries when it comes to damages, liabilities and subsidies. For questions about treatment of the oil and gas industry by local, state and federal government entities, 96% of responses were overwhelmingly in support of removing the favorable policy and tax treatment the industry receives, such as the 2005 Energy Policy Act exemptions for hydraulic fracturing from the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and CERCLA (the Superfund Law). Similarly, 96% responded that tax revenues should not be used to pay for cleanup of the 12% of the 1.4 oil and gas-related spills per day (on average) that result in water contamination in Colorado.

CLIMATE AND ACTION.

89% of participants believe that fossil fuel development (coal mining and fracking) are incompatible with the State’s Climate Action Plan (i.e., to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 26% in five years, 50% in ten years, and 90% in 30 years).

Notably, when asked if Delta County should develop its own climate plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the responses again were resoundingly positive with 92% expressing support. As a follow-up, when asked if Delta County should hire staff dedicated to addressing climate change impact on priority county goals, in particular protecting agriculture, again the response was highly in support (91%).

ATTITUDES TOWARD OIL & GAS AND RESOURCE EXTRACTION DEVELOPMENT IN NFV.

For questions specifically targeting attitudes about oil and gas development in the North Fork Valley, and fracking in particular, the responses were resoundingly unsupportive of new development in NFV.

When asked whether they would support new oil and gas development, if it were certain that this would threaten the emerging agriculture, tourism, creative arts, and recreation, 93% answered they would not.

When asked under which positive hypothetical situation related to oil and gas operations’ impacts to the economy, environment, health and safety, regulatory landscape, etc. would a respondent support oil and gas development, a very low response rate was measured, i.e. most skipped the question (only 22 participants responded). Further, there was no single positive hypothetical situation that garnered over 50% of the responses. It was only the response “all of the above” that received 12 of 22 responses for 55% support.

A question pointed out that the coal mining revenues lost in Delta County from two mine closures had actually been recovered over the last five years through other non-extractive industries. 95% of participants responded reflecting their view that there was not a “need” for oil and gas development to create long-term jobs and revenue.

For the question seeking a preference of types of new energy jobs desired for the North Fork Valley, 91% of responses indicated they want renewable energy jobs to stabilize climate and positively impact
water quantity and quality, and air quality, compared with 4% wanting fossil fuel energy industry jobs, even if the impact of such fossil fuel energy industry jobs may degrade the environment, water quantity and quality, and air quality.

When asked how they would describe the impact of industrial-scale natural gas development on their home, watershed, public lands and community, the responses were very negative. The percentage of participants who believed it would negatively impact certain specific aspects related to lifestyle and the economy were in the majority for every category: 60% to creative arts; 70% to livestock on grazing areas and to NFV; 70% to the potential for the NFV to become a clean and sustainable energy hub; 79% to property values; 80% to a healthy lifestyle; 83% to the NFV’s reputation or brand based on clean air, water and food; 88% on outdoor recreational activities on public lands, and on small acreage sustainable and organic farms; 89% on public health; 92% on air and water quality, and on wildlife and the environment. See Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
Perception of impact of natural gas extraction on home, community, watershed and public lands
OUTLOOK FOR NORTH FORK VALLEY, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL (LIFESTYLE).

When asked what makes a respondent hopeful of the future of the North Fork Valley, a thriving organic and sustainable agriculture industry received the highest response of 265 of participants (92%). See Figure 3. The high quality of life offered by the NFV was second at 87% (252), and the potential for a burgeoning clean and renewable energy sector, and the diversity of people, talent and businesses both received 84% support of respondents.

FIGURE 3
What made respondents most hopeful about the future of the NFV

Although a response concerning the topic of resource extraction was not included in this survey question, of the 41 who responded by selecting “other” for their response, only one of the 41 respondents wrote in response to “other” that their support was for oil and gas development, and one other mentioned support for “farming surviving alongside extractive industries”. Most of the rest of the other responses concerned the community, and cleaner, healthier, sustainable industries and jobs. 80% of participants preferred new job creation with long-term, resilient jobs of moderate pay, over the 1.5% who selected short-term, transient jobs with higher pay.
ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY AND ELECTED OFFICIALS IN NFV.

Respondents overwhelmingly expressed distrust with County leadership to protect its citizens concerning energy and climate. A specific question was asked whether the current Delta County Commissioners were pursuing policies in alignment with the protection of public health, safety and welfare of county residents, which solicited a strong negative response (94% responded “no”). And when asked if there was trust that the current Delta County Commissioner for District 3 is working to protect the NFV brand of clean air, water, food and healthy lifestyle, 92% responded “no”. See Figure 4. 96% of respondents believe the community residents should determine what happens with respect to oil and gas development in the region.

FIGURE 4
Trustworthiness of county leadership

There was overwhelming support (96%) for requiring the County to conduct a comprehensive economic analysis before taking an official position on proposed energy development projects. This question was accompanied with supporting information that the current Delta County commissioners have not (formally or publicly) conducted any cost benefit analysis of proposed oil and gas development projects, yet they support such projects in NFV watersheds and public lands, claiming economic benefits to the county.

When asked what is their source of information for matters concerning the County, over 50% listed each of the following sources (in order of highest responses received): KVNF, Community Organizations, Friends and Family, Delta County Independent, North Fork Merchant Herald, and Social Media.
Conclusion and Recommendations:

This Survey strongly refutes claims often made by the county commissioners that a silent majority exists in support of increased oil and gas development. Rather, it shows that a majority support a clean, healthy economy that can sustain organic farming, other agriculture, livestock, creative arts and renewable energy, as well as the North Fork Valley branding of clean air, water and the environment. The Survey results demonstrate there is overwhelming opposition to oil and gas development, which is perceived as a threat to the present economic focus of the region that depends on sustainability. Even when queried whether they would support fossil fuel extraction if all potential harms were removed, there was still a low expression of support for fossil fuel extraction.

The Survey participants represent members of the frontline community of the North Fork Valley, many of whom are involved in businesses that rely on sustainable, healthy agriculture and lifestyle. The majority of respondents see new oil and gas development as incompatible with their community’s economic and social demographic and the need for a rapid transition to a clean and renewable energy future. The NFV community does not have interest in, nor do they perceive any community benefit to oil and gas development in the region.

Respondents want the oil and gas industry to be treated the same as other industries, and not get favorable policy and tax treatment that offer exemptions to pollute or cause damage to environment. They do not want their taxes to be used toward an industry that causes water pollution. The majority of mineral rights owners surveyed prefer to keep their minerals in the ground, and surface owners want more regulatory assurances against damage to their land.

There is strong support for development of a county-wide climate plan, funded by their government.

The respondents who comprise a broad representation of community members and business organizations have indicated widely disparate views from those of the County Commissioners who have regularly expressed wholesale support for increased oil and gas development. Clearly, there is a need for more dialogue by these Commissioners with the residents of NFV who represent and support the many different growth industries within its economy that are focused on healthy lifestyle, sustainable and organic farming and agriculture, clean energy and the arts. Importantly, the opinions reflected in this survey should be considered by these elected officials during open and transparent decision-making. Their deliberations for policy making must be meaningful, by soliciting and hearing all voices of the community. The results of this Survey are widely at odds with the pro-fossil fuel and extraction-related views expressed by the County Commissioners and the policies they have pursued.

Accordingly, the County government should conduct economic studies that are comprehensive through consideration of impacts by and to each of: a) established industries, b) emerging industries that are relatively younger and presently experiencing growth in the county, and c) those other industries that may continue to supplement the economy on a sustainable, lasting basis, including and particularly, while the county considers further expansion of fossil fuel development. These studies must incorporate both direct economic impacts and indirect impacts from this extractive industry, such as the dissuasive effect that expanded fossil fuel development would have on emerging industries, tourism, etc., and the impacts from climate change caused by fossil fuel extraction. The studies must include input from a diverse set of North Fork Valley residents in a considered and transparent process, before support is expressed and/or policies are set that commit to future fossil fuel development. Policies
concerning energy development should not be pursued or established prior to robust inclusion of the community and consideration of the views of all its members. A climate plan should also be established that addresses the economic, social, and natural resource impact of various carbon reduction and economic paths the county might take.

The results of this Survey serve as a strong refutation of the county’s consistent staunch support for new oil and gas drilling in the region. A strong message has been given by a clear majority of survey respondents that the future for economic development in the region depends on industries that represent healthy, sustainable practices, and not those that contribute to air and water pollution.
Survey Discrepancies:

A. It would have been useful for two questions (16 and 34) to have also included a selection for response concerning oil and gas development / resource extraction. However, each of these questions did have a selection for response of “other”, which response also included the opportunity for the respondent to write in their answer that was missing from the choices. 32 respondents selected “other” to question 16, and only one of these 32 responses included a written answer related to extraction (“energy development consulting”). For question 34, only two of 41 “other” written responses expressed any type of support for oil and gas development and extractive industries.

B. Question 18 is considered relatively leading and therefore is not included in the points of Conclusion or Recommendations of this survey. The question would have been more useful if a description of the adverse impacts had been omitted in the question, thereby offering a greater potential to test for a more objective, current state of mind on the topic.

C. The results for question 36 indicate that the political affiliation of respondents do not closely align with the overall political affiliation of residents of the region. However, 21% of participants opted not to disclose their party affiliation, which makes it difficult to ascertain definitively if an adequate representation of party affiliation was achieved for this survey. Notwithstanding, the results of this question could indicate that strong attitudes exist on the general survey topic by people in certain political affiliations (Independents and Democrats), while they are not strong in other affiliations (Republicans). The results should not diminish the importance of the strong concordant responses to most of the questions included in the survey.

D. Somerset was not included in the survey because it is in Gunnison County even though it is directly impacted by energy development in the area.