

Remarks for Methane Press Conference

January 30, 2024

My name is Virginia Palacios, and I'm the Executive Director of Commission Shift, a statewide nonpartisan nonprofit that is building public support to reform oil and gas oversight by holding the Railroad Commission of Texas accountable to its mission in a shifting energy landscape. I'm a land & mineral owner in Webb County, one of top natural gas-producing counties in Texas. I live 2.5 miles from a rural gas gathering facility, which collects gas from wells in the surrounding area. I frequently see flares coming from that facility. Sometimes the flares are smoking too much, and other times, they're practically translucent, which indicates that methane and harmful chemicals are being released straight into the air. EPA's new rules would help to limit flaring and venting from facilities like this one. In contrast, the Railroad Commission bends the rules for facilities like these at every single Open Meeting, despite saying that they want operators to flare less. They hold the power to say no, but they refuse to wield it. Their decisions have consequences not only for our climate, but also our health.

A 2020 peer-reviewed study found that women in the Eagle Ford Shale who lived next to high rates of flaring had 50% higher odds of preterm birth.¹ Those higher odds were only found for Latinas. The small town I live next to in the Eagle Ford Shale is predominantly Latino, and 37% of our population doesn't have health insurance.² For communities like mine, living next to pollution we can't control can mean the difference between life and death. Although I'm healthy now, I don't know what the future has in store for me or my neighbors because we live so close

¹ Cushing, L. J., Vavra-Musser, K., Chau, K., Franklin, M., & Johnston, J. E. (2020). Flaring from Unconventional Oil and Gas Development and Birth Outcomes in the Eagle Ford Shale in South Texas. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 128(7), 77003. <https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP6394>

² U.S. Census. 2020 Decennial Census. Encinal CCD, La Salle County, Texas. Retrieved from: https://data.census.gov/profile/Encinal_CCD,_La_Salle_County,_Texas?g=060XX00US4828391240

to pollution that is known to cause not only preterm birth, but also cancer, heart problems, and respiratory conditions.

I'm here today to speak up for my health and the health of rural Texans throughout the state because our state oil and gas agency, the Railroad Commission of Texas, has failed to enforce their own rules. Since 2010, the Railroad Commission has only issued 11 penalties to operators who failed to comply with the flaring rules, out of tens of thousands of permits it has granted.³

The current rules and enforcement methods don't work. We need a legitimate system for protecting public health, and we especially need to remove the potential for bias in the commissioners' decisions. Railroad Commissioners are currently allowed to have personal financial interests in the same companies they make decisions about and they have historically taken at least two-thirds of their campaign contributions from the same companies they oversee.⁴ As a ninth generation Tejana from Webb County, Texas, I'm not going anywhere. I'm looking to the federal government to implement the methane rule so that state officials can't keep looking the other way.

³ Unpublished independent analysis of Railroad Commission Flare/Vent Exceptions database and open records request response dated Nov. 30, 2023. Note that the RRC Violations Database includes one additional case referred for enforcement on Jan 23, 2024.

⁴ Wheat, A. and Palacios, V. Captive Agency report series. Commission Shift and Texans for Public Justice. <https://commissionshift.org/news/captive-agency/>