

Some skipping school to work Wyoming's booming oil fields

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.03.13

CASPER, Wyo. — These are boom times in the resource-rich Cowboy State, thanks to an oil explosion whose ripples can be felt across the land.

Good-paying blue-collar jobs in the petroleum and natural gas fields of Wyoming are as plentiful as pickups here, and the unemployment rate — 4.6 percent in July — remains far below the 7.4 percent national average. But critics worry that the immense oil output includes a potential byproduct. Despite such fast-dollar success, the state may be relying too heavily on a single industry known for its dramatic downturns. Although the oil industry provides a great deal of revenue now, it could one day help paint the state into a shaky financial corner, they say.

Many fear the day when Wyoming's oil market fails, as it last did in the mid-1980s. If it fails again, it might expose a fundamental flaw in the state's job picture: The lure of the oil dollar has prompted teenagers to skip college, or abandon high school, for the petroleum fields — many without a Plan B if things go bust.

"The Biggest Mistake Of My Life"

Tyrel Wellmaker is typical of many young workers here in Wyoming. He is a high school graduate who left the Army for a low-skill petroleum job, albeit one with a salary that outstripped even those of positions that require college educations.

In his early 20s, wiry and strong, he labored as an oil field roughneck, manning the rigs that dot the region's rolling western landscape. He came home each night dirty and dead tired, but the money more than made up for it: With a six-figure salary, he purchased his own house and drove a \$50,000 pickup.

But with the boom came Wellmaker's personal bust. He soon grew tired of the dangerous conditions after witnessing fellow workers die on the job. One winter day in 2008, when the toilet in his communal trailer froze solid on a job in North Dakota, he just walked away. Without savings, he soon filed for bankruptcy. The house went into foreclosure. Two scowling repo men claimed his prized pickup. At 26, he sheepishly moved back in with his father and regretted his decision to forsake college.

“I felt I had made the biggest mistake of my life,” said Wellmaker, now 31.

But who could blame him? For most U.S. high school graduates, the quickest way to achieve the American dream is to attend college. Not so in Wyoming, where the oil boom has turned the education-to-earning-power paradigm on its head.

Fossil Fuels Run Deep

Between 2009 and 2011, the average salary nationwide for a bachelor-degree holder was \$48,997 — nearly twice what a high school graduate made (\$26,957) and more than double that of a high school dropout (\$19,013). That's according to Census Bureau figures. Compare that with Wyoming: In 2011, in the \$60,000-\$75,000 pay bracket, the number of bachelor-degree holders was outpaced by those with only high school educations. In the

\$38,000-\$47,000 bracket, even workers without high school diplomas outnumbered those with college degrees, state economists say.

Wyoming’s ties to fossil fuels run deep: 70 percent of the state’s annual revenue comes from coal, gas and uranium extraction. Some experts say the state must play the hand it was dealt.

“You have to pursue the opportunity while all those good-paying jobs are there,” said Mark Perry, an economist at the University of Michigan-Flint, who specializes in the energy industry. He predicts the oil boom will be long-lived. “Let’s be practical: A college degree is no guarantee to success anymore. Young people should grab some of this oil money. They can always go back to school,” he said. Critics say the oil flow has reduced the urgency in Wyoming to diversify its economy and attract white-collar jobs.

Little Luck In Attracting New Business

“Wyoming is an energy state; we live off the energy dollar, and people are used to the resulting low taxes,” said Sissy Goodwin, a power technology instructor at Casper College. “We’re in a boom cycle now, but the bust will come. We need our politicians to look for the non-energy jobs of the future. But they’re not doing that.” Goodwin already knows many young men who returned to school after being injured in the oil fields.

Although jobs for unskilled workers are plentiful, those for college graduates are not. Last year, 16.5 percent of Wyoming’s 288,000 jobs required a bachelor’s degree, according to the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services. By comparison, 67.2 percent — more than two-thirds — required only a high school diploma. Jim Rose, director of the Wyoming Community College Commission, said state residents were almost afraid to consider a future without oil. “The newest boom has meant extraordinary revenue, and it’s been difficult for many, legislators included, to be weaned from that, to say, ‘Let’s talk about economic diversity,’” he said.

Wyoming has tried to attract new businesses, such as a fledgling high-tech industry, but with little luck. “There’s a lot of blame to go around,” he said. “Colleges can’t train students for a workforce that doesn’t exist. If Wyoming started training people to work in the automobile or aircraft industry, we’d just be buying them a ticket to leave the state because there are no jobs here.”

"I Need A Real Career"

Jonathan Odlin has been trying to deal with it. A former Marine who did three tours in Iraq, he took a job in the Wyoming oil fields with a cement company in 2006. He had a high school diploma, and the pay was good. But he soon loathed the unpredictable hours chasing the oil. Then, in 2008, a good friend was cut in half in an industrial accident — after taking Odlin’s shift. That’s when he called it quits. Odlin, 30, will soon earn a degree in power plant technology at Casper College, as he struggles to support five children. “The oil fields may mean quick bucks, but for low-level workers like me, they’re not the place to be. I need a real career,” he said.