



West Virginia  
**Surface Owners' Rights Organization**

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## **New State-Wide Organization Formed to Protect Landowner's Rights**

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Charleston – WV West Virginia landowners now have a new organization focused on protecting them from abuses by oil & gas drillers – the WV Surface Owner's Rights Organization (WV-SORO). The group was formed this summer by several state land owners and public interest lawyer Dave McMahon. "Drilling permits in WV have skyrocketed from 900 per year to over 3,000 so we're hearing from lots more furious landowners who believe they've been run over," commented McMahon. "Recent court rulings on royalty shortages to mineral owners indicate that both groups are being abused by operators."

Another founding member, Roane County landowner John Snyder, took local driller Stalnaker Energy to court over damages to his wooded property. "This used to be my kids' hundred acre wood. Cool, peaceful, the sun was filtered by the trees. It literally drove my daughter to tears when she saw what they were doing to what she wanted for a house site," cited Snyder when describing his disappointment and anger over the location of a new gas well drilled by the company last year.

"When it comes to protecting your property rights against the abuses of the oil & gas drillers, the playing field is tilted about as far as it can go in favor of the drillers," noted Gary Zuckett, an organizer for the group and Executive Director of WV Citizen Action. "As it now stands, landowners get a notice in the mail only 15 days before a permit to drill is approved on their property. The landowner can then send in comments to the WV Office of Oil & Gas. What the notice doesn't say is that under current WV code there is very little the State can do to make changes in the locations of roads, well sites and gas lines," Zuckett added, "These are some of the problems that WV-SORO wants to tackle."

The organization is in the middle of a fall membership drive with the goal of recruiting additional members before the legislature comes to Charleston in January. Its goal is to get state lawmakers to pass a "Surface Owners Bill of Rights" to help "level the playing field" and give landowners more say in the location of wells and access roads and other matters dealing with oil & gas exploration on private property.

***More next page***

Since its formation this summer, WV-SORO now lists members from 38 of West Virginia's counties and members residing in 11 other states that are still caring for their home places. "We'll be calling on our members from all over to come to Charleston during the legislative session to tell their stories, make sure their lawmakers are informed of the seriousness of this problem, and get them to fix it," said Zuckett.

Mr. Zuckett recalls several personal horror stories in dealing with different oil & gas drillers that sank wells on his 50 acre farm in Ritchie County over the years. "My best hay meadow was used against my vocal protests for a well location. It's now useless to me, but every year I have to pay taxes on it with out ever getting a lick of damages or any hay since then," explained Zuckett. "One year another outfit tore up the road into our hollow so badly we could hardly get in and out that winter. That's the time we had a foot of gray soap suds floating down our little stream from where they breeched their drilling pit and let it out into the run," he added.

The group contends that the WV Division of Oil & Gas is understaffed to do the job that's required of it. "West Virginia has only 14 Oil & Gas Inspectors to handle 45,000 active wells, and that number is increasing by 3,000 new well permits per year, added McMahon, "Even the laws dealing with surface & water protection now on the books can't be effectively enforced with such a lack of inspection."

WV-SORO is building a resource center and clearing house for issues that affect surface and small mineral owners. Their most popular resource (available for download on their web page or through the mail) is the 166 page "Surface Owner's Guide to Oil & Gas" written by McMahon to advise WV landowners of their rights according to current WV law when drillers come on their property. Other sections of their site link to topographical maps and can show actual satellite pictures of individual farms and properties. The group is also developing a list of lawyers who are willing to represent landowners on oil & gas issues. The newest addition to SORO's web page is a slide show that explains potential problems that oil & gas drilling can cause to springs and water wells. They'll be posting comments from landowners about their personal experiences with specific companies in the near future.

WV-SORO can be reached on the web at [www.wvsoro.org](http://www.wvsoro.org) or by phone at 304-346-8928.

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