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Information will be key to how the energy industry operates in the future.

That was the essential message the three panelists at the Industry Issues panel offered their audience Thursday at the Permian Basin Petroleum Association's annual meeting.

Information about clusters of earthquakes will be key to how the Railroad Commission issues saltwater disposal well permits, said Craig Pearson, the agency's seismologist.

"We don't know about earthquake activity in Texas before the 1880s when newspapers began printing stories. Some have drawn the conclusion that Texas has never had earthquakes, and that's simply not true. Texas has had and will continue to have earthquakes," he said.

The rise in numbers of quakes seems to be centered around high volume disposal wells, he said, with researchers finding those wells located near faults that extended into the overlying Ellenburger formation.

The Permian Basin has seen little activity in the Ellenburger formation because it has been blessed with the San Andres formation, as well, he said. But he said that problems with shifting faults are starting to be seen in the San Andres.

While he stressed that much more needs to be learned about what causes faults to shift, Pearson said the commission has enacted rules that he believes are working.

Companies seeking permits for saltwater wells must review a 100-mile radius around the proposed wellbore, and if the U.S. Geological Survey database indicates a fault, the company must provide more data. About 40 such applications have been reviewed and about 75 percent have been approved, Pearson said.

Data about seismic events is just part of the information the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University Texas wants to gather, said Michael Young, associate director.

He said the bureau will lead the TexNet Seismic Monitoring Program, which will have 38 permanent seismometers and 36 portable seismometers around the state.

The bureau also has launched the West Texas Resource Initiative. It is designed to examine the area's tight shale oil reserves, why the Permian Basin has been rejuvenated and offer an unbiased look at how much is available to be produced.

The bureau's hydrologist is working with operators to determine how much water they need for hydraulic fracturing and how much flowback of fracturing fluids and produced water can be expected — all in an effort to reduce the use of fresh water and promote the use of brackish and produced water.

"We hope these studies will improve long-term planning for operators and help determine long-term water needs, how much water use will be needed by the oil and gas industry and evaluate flowback and produced water" for its reuse or recycling into a useable water source, Young said.

Making information more easily available online is one goal of New Mexico's Oil Conservation Division, said David Catanach, director.

He said his agency will be rolling out a GIS module on OCD Online that initially will offer a layer linked to OCD Online and offer information on land ownership and spacing units.

The agency has also formed an Industry Advisory Group comprised of eight members from the New Mexico Oil & Gas Association, Independent Petroleum Association of New Mexico and the PBPA. The goal is to discuss issues of interest to both the associations and the agency.

A revised financial assurance rule will allow operators to post a blanket bond to cover a number of temporarily abandoned wells instead of having to post bonds for individual wells.


New Mexico is also launching a new Energy Policy & Implementation Plan that will focus on state and private jobs, access to federal lands, collaboration with federal agencies, streamlining regulations, infrastructure needs, education and energy-water nexus.

Another goal is to reduce flaring by requiring gas capture plans as part of the drilling permit

process and phasing in target goals.

"I assure you we will contact the industry before making any significant changes," Catanach said.

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