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Land commissioner should back measures to end natural gas waste

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COMMENTARY: We're deeply troubled by New Mexico State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn's recent opposition to commonsense rules that would cut natural gas waste in New Mexico.

In a highly political [news release](#) last month funded by taxpayers, Commissioner Dunn publicly opposed the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's Natural Gas Waste Rule, despite the fact that New Mexico ranks No. 1 in the nation for wasted natural gas. [ICF International](#) found that oil and gas companies burn, vent, or leak \$101 million worth of natural gas each year in New Mexico alone and \$330 million across the United States.

Wasting our natural resources goes against what we teach our kids. Hunters and anglers use all of what we kill or catch, and we feel the same about our natural resources – including taxpayer-owned natural gas resources on our public lands.

That's why I lent my voice in support of a new [radio ad campaign](#) sponsored by the sportsmen group HECHO (Hispanics Enjoying Camping Hunting and Outdoors), which criticized Commissioner Dunn for opposing efforts to curb natural gas waste.

It really is disgraceful, especially since wasted natural gas means lost royalty revenue to the State of New Mexico. According to a report by the [Western Values Project](#), New Mexico lost more than \$50 million in revenue over the last five years that would have gone to support the state's public education system.

Additional funds are critically needed given that the state is staring down a [\\$120 million budget shortfall](#) over the next two years due to declining energy production, lower-than-expected royalty payments, and a sluggish economy. Instead of opposing common sense, Commissioner Dunn should be getting his own house in order and ensuring that New Mexico taxpayers are getting a fair return for developing our natural resources on our state lands.

In fact, a February 2016 [report from the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department](#) (EMNRD) drafted at the request of Sen. Howie Morales found that natural gas waste was also an issue for lands that the state land commission office oversees. In EMNRD's letter, they wrote that about half the natural gas wasted from flaring and venting in 2015 — about 17 million thousand cubic feet of gas — occurred on state or private lands.

Efforts to curb natural gas waste enjoys strong support across the state. More than **40 local officials** have backed the BLM rule, and a January 2016 bipartisan poll from [Colorado College](#) found that 73 percent of New Mexicans support strong action to curb waste on public lands.

Let's hope Commissioner Dunn takes a second look at the issue and comes to his senses for the good of New Mexico and our children.

Rock Ulibarri is a San Miguel County commissioner and advisory board member with HECHO.