

## **OIL FIELD DEATHS ON RISE**

**Drilling and fracking have taken especially high toll on workers in Texas**

*By Lise Olsen*

Oil field deaths reached 545 during America's drilling and fracking frenzy from 2008 to 2012, with Texas' 216 reported fatalities leading the nation. Pennsylvania and North Dakota also are recording dramatic increases in worker deaths, according to updated workplace fatality figures released last week by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The data, released in response to a Houston Chronicle request, comes as government officials and industry leaders are deadlocked in an ongoing debate about how to plug holes in nationwide safety rules for the industry. Last year, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration formally asked for public comments on how to expand regulations of potentially hazardous workplaces, including drill and well sites, following the disastrous explosion at a fertilizer plant in West.

The U.S. Chemical Safety Board and other safety advocates recommended applying tougher process safety rules to save lives at drilling sites. The federal government already enforces those rules at refineries and chemical plants. Offshore, drilling and well-supply companies already follow similarly strict rules, too. But industry advocates have for decades opposed them at on-land drilling sites.

### **Son's death**

Dennis Bolt, a longtime oil field worker, lost his son Jason in 2011 when decades-old drilling equipment bought used at a Permian Basin-area auction flew apart and killed the younger Bolt and a coworker at a drill site near Lamesa.

"My son's death has opened my eyes to the fact that this 'recklessness' is no longer acceptable by me as well as many others," Bolt said. "Lives are being lost at an alarming rate."

The 545 oil field deaths nationally from 2008-2012 represented a 3.2 percent increase over fatalities recorded in the five years prior to 2008, with Texas' total deaths up 7.4 percent.

Among the other states recording increased fatalities during the boom, North Dakota reported a more than 340 percent increase to 31 fatalities and Pennsylvania saw a 300 percent increase to 20 deaths. Oklahoma saw 68 deaths, up 24 percent.

Three states recorded decreases, with Wyoming down 45 percent to 22, New Mexico down 36 percent to 21 and Louisiana down 2 percent to 60.

Wyoming's plunge is noteworthy because the state is the only of the eight energy producers to have engaged in a sustained state-sponsored effort to reduce workplace deaths.

After a 2008 report identified it as having nation's worst occupational fatality rate, Wyoming leaders hired five new state-funded OSHA inspectors, employed a full-time occupational epidemiologist to collect and study workplace deaths, passed related reforms and established statewide safety groups that make recommendations, according to documents and an interview with current state occupational epidemiologist Mack Sewell.

Wyoming's 22 deaths from 2008-2012 were about half the 40 deaths the state recorded in drilling, well service and petroleum extraction from 2003-2007.

The Wyoming Oil and Gas Industry Safety Alliance, one of the state's new safety advisory groups, now has "over 1,000 members and numerous collaborating organizations," according to Jack Bedessem, its president.

"For the last three years our efforts have been focused on enhancing the safety culture in all facets of the industry," said Bedessem, who is also CEO of Wyoming-based Trihydro Corp. "We

still have a lot of work to do to ensure every one of our employees gets home healthy and safe every night.”

### **Better solutions sought**

With government safety regulators and industry officials deadlocked over new safety procedures for oil drilling and fracking sites, Dr. M. Sam Mannan, director of the Mary Kay O’Connor Process Safety Center at Texas A&M University, has argued that a preliminary analysis of 2012 industry accident data suggests that only a fraction of U.S. oil field fatalities might be prevented by expanding process safety rules.

Specific workplace programs and training, however, possibly could have saved the lives of about two dozen workers killed in fires, poisoned by gasses or electrocuted in 2012 alone, the center’s preliminary data shows.

Bolt, the Texas oil field worker who lost his son, believes that improving OSHA’s federal inspections simply isn’t enough, especially since many drilling and well sites are isolated, the agency is understaffed and its safety rules are out-of-date.

### **Going to Legislature**

Jason Bolt and his coworker, Sandy Daves, friends and fathers in their 20s, perished at a Robinson Drilling work site in the Permian Basin, at a location that government safety inspectors took hours to reach, public records show. Those were two of five fatalities reported by Robinson in the last five years.

Dennis Bolt insists that Texans should be able to tap their own know-how to address persistent dangers in the oil patch and says he plans to ask the Legislature to address issues in the 2015 session. Bolt would like to see leaders tackle many tough problems like drug and alcohol use on worksites and the reuse of old and obsolete oil field equipment. He also wants to see them consider requiring law enforcement officers to routinely secure fatal accident sites to help preserve evidence and prevent cover-ups.

Wrongful death lawsuits filed in Harris County on behalf of Bolt and Daves have been settled. While the terms of the settlement prohibit Dennis Bolt from discussing the accident, he’s not done talking about the need for reforms.

“I want these Robinson deaths to not be in vain,” Bolt said. “The oil field must change.”  
lise.olsen@chron.com

## **Oil boom deaths**

**Fatalities of workers in drilling, well service and petroleum extraction companies:**

	<b>2003–2007</b>	<b>2008–2012</b>	<b>Change</b>
North Dakota	7	31	343%
Pennsylvania	5	20	300%
Oklahoma	55	68	24%
Texas	201	216	7%
Colorado	21	22	5%
Louisiana	61	60	-2%
New Mexico	33	21	-36%
Wyoming	40	22	-45%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics