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Dave Efaw: Drillers should be hiring locals

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- There is currently quite a discrepancy in Wetzel County. Last month, Wetzel was again ranked as having the highest unemployment rate in the state, but it also has the highest rate of natural gas drilling activity in the region. How can a county that's booming with Marcellus Shale natural gas development still have record high unemployment?

Delegate Tim Manchin, D-Marion, knows the answer. "Wetzel County has the state's highest unemployment rate, while the hotels are inundated with out-of-state workers," Manchin told a meeting of the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in Charleston.

Wetzel citizens are watching the natural gas industry flourish in their own backyard, while RVs and trucks with license plates from Texas, Louisiana and other far-flung states roll in to do jobs local workers should be doing.

In a region that has both high unemployment as well as a trained, professional work force of men and women ready and anxious to work, there is absolutely no reason to import large numbers of out-of-state workers.

Dominion and other energy companies are big on publicizing their commitment to local communities and spreading a lot of token donations around to local organizations. However, big public-relations campaigns and a few donations aren't going to help Wetzel County's biggest problem: unemployment.

If the energy companies are truly committed to contributing to our local communities, whose natural resources mean billions to their bottom line, they need to hire locally.

Local workers mean that paychecks stay in their communities and in turn help everyone in the local economy flourish. Without investing in local workers, the only ones who will flourish from Marcellus Shale are Big Energy and their investors. We're not ready to sit back and watch Big Energy make billions at the expense of local communities that are already struggling.

We want Marcellus Shale and the natural gas industry that can be built upon it to benefit both the natural gas companies and local communities. This goal is now being addressed by a document called "The Marcellus Principles," a commonsense set of guidelines that will help ensure local residents benefit from the natural resources in their own backyards.

We are asking local workers, community members, elected officials and corporations to all sign on to the Marcellus Principles for the good of all involved in the booming Marcellus Shale gas industry.

The Marcellus Principles assert that West Virginia's most important natural resource is its people. If the natural gas industry wants to build and develop here, it needs to hire local workers so the communities and companies can share a prosperous future together.

Efaw is secretary-treasurer of the West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades Council.