

Pride and Prejudice - Exploring the Rio Grande Rift

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A small oil discovery in 1986 resulted in the first oil produced and sold from the Rio Grande Rift. The geology of this potential resource and the politics behind its delay in development are discussed in some detail. Low oil prices, distance from market, lack of development capital and down-hole mechanical problems delayed attempted remedial work on the well until 2005. Tecton Energy, a Canadian Company, attempting a recompletion, pulled the pump and found it had never been seated. Nevertheless, the well flowed close to a thousand barrels of 40 gravity oil over the intervening years. The well apparently flowed when the fluid column was agitated as gas pressured up the casing when occasional pumping was attempted.

Tecton, informed Santa Fe County of its plans to develop the field and to drill a number of additional exploration wells. This caused a firestorm from various environmentalist and "green" groups that pressured the Santa Fe County Commissioners to place a one-year moratorium on further oil and gas operations. New and unreasonably more restrictive regulations were adopted. The Governor of New Mexico, running for the President of the United States, then placed a second moratorium, in addition to the County's, on further oil and gas operations in Santa Fe County. These time delays and harassments resulted in the Canadian Company plugging the well and shutting down its operations.

These actions have de-facto delayed and discouraged development of what may be a 50 million barrel recoverable oil play in the fractured Niobrara shales and other Cretaceous objectives in southern Santa Fe County area. Santa Fe County's pride in its "uniqueness" is understandable. However, its actions are economically prejudicial to all the citizens of New Mexico. By its actions the County infers that other counties should contribute their oil and gas to the economy, while it places seemingly unreasonably restrictions on oil and gas development and discourages development of its natural resources. This discovery is important in opening up not just a new oil field, but a whole new and badly needed oil and gas-producing province, the Rio Grande Rift, for both the State and for the United States.