

Dan Larson: 5 things I learned at the Colorado Energy Summit

By Dan Larson
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The Colorado Energy Summit, which took place this week in Denver, drew more than 1,000 people each day. (For The Tribune/Dan Larson)

DENVER — The Colorado Oil and Gas Association's Energy Summit, which concluded this week, offered a clear illustration of just how much things have changed in the energy industry.

Here are five key takeaways from the event:

• **1. Good Vibes:** Attendance is up and deals are being made. Life, interest and activity has come back to Colorado's oil and gas industry. The good news was on display at this week's annual Energy Summit, hosted by the Colorado Oil & Gas Association at the Colorado Convention Center. COGA reports attendance topped 1,000 registered both days of the annual fossil fuel fest; even more telling were the crowded aisles, filled booth spaces and long lines for coffee. Filling the exhibition hall, 76 exhibitors set up shop at this year's event.



Larson

• **2. Campaign kick-off:** The second-day lunch at the Energy Summit is when COGA rolls out the big guns — the high-profile, A-list, headliner from industry, or Washington D.C., or bigtime sports. This year's Wednesday lunch was no exception and seats sold out days in advance. This being an election year, the featured speakers could not be more high profile than the two candidates for Colorado governor: Republican State Treasurer Walker Stapleton, and Democratic Congressman Jared Polis. By now, both candidates are in full campaign mode. However, since this was a pre-Labor Day appearance, the format was a stump speech tailored to Colorado's oil and gas industry.

The debates will come later and neither candidate went out on a limb, nor did they share the stage with the other. Still, the oil and gas audience was enthusiastic to hear both candidates and seemed to enjoy booing down the trio of planted hecklers who tried to confront Polis for not opposing fracking with enough vigor.

Earlier, Gov. John Hickenlooper hit all the right notes for the crowd as he addressed COGA for the last time as the state's top executive. As usual, he referred to himself as a "failed geologist," which always draws a chuckle from the COGA crowd.

Without even a hint of where his career takes him next, Hickenlooper underlined his efforts to bring opposing sides together, no matter how far apart. As he put it, discussing differences rather than shouting at each other is simply the "Colorado way."

• **3. New hires:** It is no surprise that Colorado's oil and gas industry is now on a hiring kick because the action is back in the Denver-Julesburg basin, which includes Weld County. However, memories of the downturn are still fresh. We remember seeing belts being tightened and sizes being righted and contracts being shredded.

It was a difficult time. Lay-offs were the order of the day and everyone was tagged, from the bashful new hire to the resident know-it-all;

from the eager young pup to the cranky old dude. As we heard many times, downsizing meant empty cubicles but it also gave the boss a chance to hit the reset button on the company's "most valuable resource," its workers. Finally, when the corner was turned and jobs again needed to be filled, it was not the cranky old dude who got called back. In this revival, activity around the office is driven by recent grads and mid-career strivers.

That makes sense; who better to take the reins of the new industry's new big-data business model than the digital natives of the next generation. It's happening now. Walk the aisles at this year's Energy Summit Expo, and you saw that a good portion of the exhibitors were vendors of software, advanced engineering and data solutions. It's just a fact of business life in 2018, and it was quite apparent at this year's Energy Summit.

Observing the crowds in the Expo hall and attending the presentations, it is clear that oil and gas offices are once again filled with energetic, engaged workers — most of whom are under 45 years old. And, in an industry that has often been called a giant man cave, this year, at Colorado's biggest oil and gas event, a significant portion of the industry's workers are women. So, anyone who tells you that the oil and gas industry is stuck in the past and run like a profitable frat house, is simply not paying attention.

• **4. Fabulous Eighties:** At every opportunity, COGA President and CEO Dan Haley reminded the membership that this was the 30th Anniversary of the association's annual gathering in Denver. To set the tone, at the start of each segment in the Four Seasons Ballroom, pop songs and video clips from the 1980s ran on the big screen to remind the audience of how long ago 30 years really is. Among the videos were Tom Hanks dancing on the giant piano keys from the movie, "Big;" Russian comic, Yakov Smirnoff, bearded and at the height of his 15-minutes of fame, mangling the language as a gasoline spokesman; and a fuzzy tourism video highlighting Denver's 1988 skyline, apparently produced by KCNC-TV Channel 4. Finally, Haley asked the audience for a show of hands from those who attended the COGA conference in 1988. I counted all the raised hands on the fingers of my left hand.

• **5. Major Exit:** The final note about this year's COGA Energy Summit is about who was not there. COGA has traditionally positioned itself as the voice of Colorado's small to mid-size and large independents. Although they were never a big presence, the giant international corporations we think of as major oil companies — Exxon Mobil, Shell, BP, Chevron, Total, and Conoco – managed to keep a toe in the COGA waters while doing most of their industry business through the American Petroleum Institute. Once API formally set up shop here as the Colorado Petroleum Council, the majors shifted all their attention to the council. As a result, they were not present at the Energy Summit. And only Conoco, with its leading role in the long story of oil and gas in the Rockies, today maintains a membership in Colorado's largest oil and gas trade association.

— *Dan Larson is a Colorado journalist and PR pro. He has three decades experience in the oil and gas industry as a communications specialist. Working industry segments upstream and down, Dan led marketing programs, neighbor discussions, community development and contribution programs, and crisis response efforts. He covers the industry for The Tribune.*

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