

Press Release
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Immigrant oil and gas workers laud U.S. Congressman Vasquez's bill to compensate families hurt by industry health hazards

Hobbs, NM--On Wednesday, seventy-five immigrant oil and gas workers and families from Lea and Eddy counties met with U.S. Representative Gabe Vasquez to talk about the perilous realities of working in the industry and the need for safer jobs and more workforce development opportunities in the region.

Members of *Somos Un Pueblo Unido* who have been organizing to advance worker's rights in Lea County for over a decade hosted a public roundtable with the Congressman as he announced his introduction of the *Energy Workers Health Improvement and Compensation Fund Act*, a bill meant to hold oil and gas companies accountable for adverse health effects on workers and their families living in close proximity to extraction sites.

"For decades, oil and gas dependent communities have suffered from toxic exposures to chemicals resulting in illnesses and chronic diseases that continue to harm our families. As an industry worker, I hope this bill will raise awareness on the dangers of the industry and create accountability for owners looking to take shortcuts when it comes to the health and safety regulations," said Oscar Gutiérrez, member of *Somos Lea County* who has worked the oil industry for six years.

New Mexico's Permian Basin region is one of the top energy producing regions in the world, and one of the highest occupational fatality rates in the US oil and gas sector. Vasquez' legislation would create a compensation fund paid by industry executives for medical expenses not covered by insurance associated with asthma, heat-related illness, and other respiratory and cardiovascular diseases caused by methane emissions, high levels of smog, and exposure to harmful chemicals.

"New Mexico relies heavily on oil and gas revenues, but policymakers often ignore the grave cost to frontline communities and industry workers. Immigrant families in the Permian Basin are disproportionately impacted by inadequate enforcement of health and safety standards, long hours, and extreme work conditions. We are greatly encouraged by Congressman Vasquez's willingness to listen to and stand up for these essential workers, not just industry owners," said Marcela Díaz, Executive Director of *Somos Un Pueblo Unido*.

According to the Department Workforce Solutions' 2022 New Mexico Labor Market Review, over 55% of New Mexico's energy workers are people of color and 43% are Latino.

Vasquez's legislation would:

- Establish a federal fund paid by oil and gas companies and managed by the federal Department of Labor.
- Ensure oil and gas companies make a contribution to the fund equal to the salaries and benefits of its 10 most highly paid employees.

- Compensate oil and gas workers and their families for medical expenses, co-payments and other costs not covered by private insurance, Medicaid, or Medicare associated with certain medical conditions such as asthma, heat-related illness, and other respiratory and cardiovascular diseases caused by methane emissions, high levels of smog and exposure to harmful chemicals.
- Cover workers who currently work or have worked at an oil and gas site for at least one year.
- Workers and immediate family members would also be compensated if they live within 20 miles of an oil and gas extraction site for at least 1 year.

“As a former industry worker who suffered injuries and health problems because of my job, I think this bill is a great first step in exposing the need for protection and compensation to essential oil and gas workers. Our working conditions are inhumane. I hope we can continue working with elected leaders like Congressman Vasquez to ensure our frontline communities are included in conversations about worker’s rights and the need for a just transition for oil workers.” said Manuel Garfio, former oil worker and member of Somos.

To read more on the Energy Workers Health Improvement and Compensation Fund Act (H.R. 5222) [click here](#).

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