

DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Building a better sound wall: Oil and gas startup raises the bar on urban operations

Oil and gas startup raises the bar on urban operations

CATHY PROCTOR

Reporter, Denver Business Journal

Colorado's oil and gas industry has erected tall, temporary 30-foot high walls around drilling sites in urban areas for a few years, but Heidi Gill, 31, knew they could be safer and better.

The walls help insulate nearby homes from the noise, dust, lights and odors that come with drilling wells to pull oil and natural gas from rock formations more than a mile deep. In general, sound walls consist of panels of a rubber-like acoustic material, designed to absorb and block sound, fastened to steel beams that hold the walls up.

But, Gill says, many of the walls around drilling sites – visible from nearby homes and communities – don't look that great and could be improved.

They get dirty, and sometimes they rip in Colorado's blustery winds. She also wanted to make them safer for the crews who put them in place and work in their shadow.

So Gill spent the last year raising \$10 million to start Urban Solution Group, a Denver-based, three-person firm that helps companies reduce their impacts and navigate community concerns about their operations.

"I believe you can have socially compatible oil and gas development. This is a resource humanity needs, we all use it, and you can have oil and gas development near people but you have to plan appropriately and mitigate impacts," Gill said.

And her company's first, patented sound walls are standing at four drilling sites in Colorado's Denver-Julesburg Basin.

Four more sites will get Urban's sound walls by the end of June, with orders for more of the walls, manufactured in Colorado Springs, pouring in, Gill said.

"I was like I need one wall; now I need 70 walls. We are sold out of walls through August," she said.

"The overwhelming support for Urban we've received from the operators shows that safer and more efficient urban operations for oil and gas is a hot topic."

Energy companies like Urban's sound walls because they're faster to put up, safer, stronger, and more appealing visually, Gill and others say. An engineer designs the setup each site will need before the walls are put in place.

Urban's next generation of walls will have a surface that can be printed, allowing pictures to be placed on the walls.

At a drilling site southwest of Mead High School in Longmont, operated by Anadarko Petroleum Corp., Urban's walls line one side of the drilling site, the side that faces a suburban neighborhood that rises conspicuously from the surrounding farm fields. Stacks



of hay bales mark the boundary line between the other side of the well pad and the surrounding dirt field.

Urban's walls link the panel sections together, making it faster, easier and safer to lift a section into place.

At the site the DBJ visited, the sound walls were in place in four days, compared to the six days it typically takes, said Kurt Weaver, who supervises the work Anadarko does to reduce and mitigate impacts around drilling sites.

"It's important that we have a vendor we can count on when the time line is tight. As we get closer to urban sites, the less time we take the better," Weaver said.

"They're visually appealing inside and out, with signs embedded in them for the exit doors, and they're cleaner too," said Chad Brebis, Anadarko's construction supervisor for the DJ Basin.

And in a crucial test, Urban's walls withstood a recent wind storm that saw gusts of 89 miles per hour, Gill said.

"The design worked just as we intended. The walls can sway in the wind, like skyscrapers," Gill said.

Gill credits Anadarko, where she worked for three years prior to starting Urban, for agreeing to be the startup's first customer.

"You have to have a client who's willing to be the first one and they were the perfect partner because they really want a safe operation and they care about the communities where they work," she said.

Word of Urban's walls also has spread beyond Colorado.

"We're being asked to expand into other states. We have more orders than we have walls," Gill said.

But, she said, Urban will remain focused on the DJ Basin – for now.