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Canyon couple in standoff with gas company

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

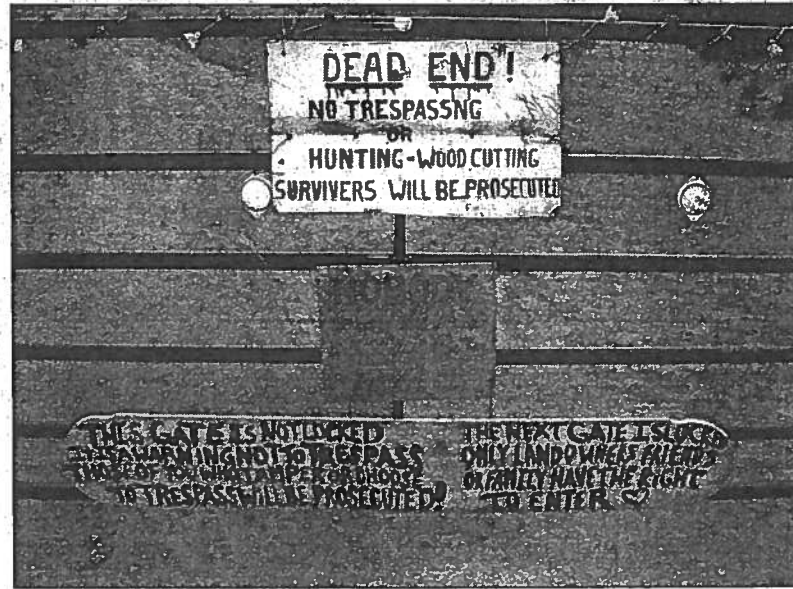
WESTON — Carter Morris and Joanie Steiner say they have had it with noisy gas company trucks destroying their bucolic mountain lifestyle.

So the Wet Canyon couple, who live a simple life in the hills west of Trinidad with their 2-month-old son and Joanie's parents, last week locked the gate on the road in front of their house and parked their car behind it, thereby blocking trucks sent by Evergreen Resources from reaching a natural gas drilling site a few miles further west.

Evergreen Resources, the largest employer in Las Animas County, has not taken kindly to the blocked road.

Stephanie Basey, Raton Basin operations manager for Evergreen, said Thursday that blocking a surface subdivision road is illegal (unless it's the last house at the end of the road) and called for the Las Animas County sheriff to unblock it later Thursday afternoon.

However, Sheriff Jim Casias is still investigating the situation and as of late Friday the gate remained blocked. Even if



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Signs on a gate on a rugged dirt road warn truckers from Evergreen Resources that they are intruding on private property. Joanie Steiner and Carter Morris say noise and dust from the trucks is ruining the quiet life they enjoy in the mountains west of Trinidad.

Evergreen submits paperwork showing the company has legal access rights to use the road, most small county subdivisions have different covenants and easement rights in place along their property lines that could complicate the issue, Casias said.

Basey disagreed.

"We have a surface use agreement with landowner Al Robinson to drill a well on a lot he owns and have every legal right to use that subdivision road," said Basey.

She said Evergreen thought the access issues had been resolved at a recent meeting with about 10 Wet Canyon

property owners and residents. "But then our contractors went out there about 10 a.m. Wednesday and discovered the locked gate and couldn't get through."

On Friday, Basey said that the sheriff's department had indicated to her that the matter was a civil issue and that the two parties should try to resolve it.

Just a couple of miles east of the home where Morris and Steiner live, more signs on an unlocked but chained-shut gate on the same pockmarked dirt road state that the road is a dead end, no trespassing is allowed, violators would be prosecuted and only family members have a right to enter. "That gate had always been open before," Basey said.

She maintains, however, that the road blockage is more serious than the unlocked gate because court documents appear to show that Morris and Steiner are apparently renting the house they are living in and that it's really owned by Mary

Sullivan.

Not so, says Dennis Steiner, Joanie's father. He says he and his daughter "own the property free and clear. I have a warranty deed to it in hand and we are the rightful owners."

Joanie Steiner said that she and Morris decided to block the road to protest the gas industry's pervasive drilling activities, heavy truck traffic and the resulting dust that is ruining their tranquil wilderness lifestyle.

They live primarily off the land and their home doesn't have electricity or phone service.

"We are also representing other homeowners who live in this area, including some absentee owners, who feel as we do," said Steiner.

In an open letter, Morris summed up the couple's feelings on why they decided to take such drastic action.

"We are letting the sun supply the electricity we use. We're

growing as much of our own food as we can, most of the meat is supplied by local game and we are building our house with stone and wood thinned from the land," he said.

"We are not the consumers of this methane gas, yet are being forced to pay the price with these disruptions to our lives. This is not freedom. I feel it's the same as if a stranger parked his butt in your front yard or on your couch and said, 'I'm going to sit here and stay for a long time and make lots of noise and someday I might get violent. Get used to it.'"

"It may be the law right now but I won't stand for this antagonism," Morris said.

Evergreen and other methane gas companies contend the potential for pipeline explosions has been overhyped, although numerous pipeline explosions and resulting fires have been documented in recent years in Colorado and New Mexico.

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