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Some roughnecks' rough behavior grates on law enforcement

By MIKE SACCONI The Daily Sentinel

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An influx of young, transient energy industry workers to Mesa and Garfield counties has compounded the stress on law enforcement agencies and criminal justice services, according to local officials.

"There's no doubt it has had an effect," Mesa County Sheriff Stan Hilkey said. "Whatever the industry is, if it's causing growth here, growth is causing more demands and putting more pressure on us."

Hilkey cautioned it is difficult to quantify the direct effects of energy industry employees on Mesa County crime, because the county does not track that information.

Nonetheless, the growth of the industry's "transient population" of workers has had some effect, he said.

Mesa County Chief Deputy District Attorney Dan Rubinstein said the nature of energy field workers can lead them to methamphetamine use: young, single men with large amounts of cash and long work days.

"The energy industry attracts the type of person who I think is (at) high risk to be a user," Rubinstein said.

Although there is no proven cause and effect between energy development and methamphetamine use, the risk factors are there, he said.

Rubinstein said in light of these factors, energy companies have expressed openness to addressing potential problems among their workers to head off the "confluence of dynamics" that might lead to meth use among roughnecks.

Beyond law enforcement, the energy boom's accompanying population growth has quickly filled jails and other programs that cannot keep pace with booming demand.

Jesse Smith, assistant county administrator for Garfield County, told lawmakers this week that energy-spurred growth has helped fill the county's newest community corrections facility in Rifle.

Less than two months into its operation, Smith said the county's \$1.5 million community corrections facility is nearly full.

He said the Garfield County Jail has experienced similar crowding.

Smith, whose comments came as part of a tour of Garfield and Rio Blanco counties, added the county is planning to add a wing to the center to focus on meth treatment.

Steve Reynolds, a member of Garfield County's community corrections board, said of the 21 inmates at the Rifle facility who are not in transition from prison, 35 percent of them say they were employed in the oil and gas industry at the time of their arrest.

He told lawmakers 43 percent of inmates said they had worked in the oil and gas industry within three years of their arrest.

And because of the "prevalence" of methamphetamine on drill rigs, Reynolds said, community corrections inmates are not allowed to work in the industry during their sentences.

Roughnecks' meth habits cannot be blamed on the industry, Reynolds said, but he has heard stories about workers staying awake for their shifts by using the drug.

Offender anecdotes also suggest the roughnecks, many who come to Colorado from out of state, obtain their meth through the mail and not from local dealers, he said.

Even with these traces of data, Mesa State College professor Michael Gizzi said it could take some time before the direct effect of energy development on Mesa and Garfield Counties on criminal justice services is quantified.

In the meantime, Dennis Berry, director of Mesa County Criminal Justice Services, said local agencies are just going to have to cope with "being behind the eight ball" in confronting the region's