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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Ethics loophole benefits officials

Raising money while making laws is legal during special session

By James Davis

ALBANY — Thirty years ago, following a bribery scandal involving a former speaker of the House, lawmakers passed a law that prohibited legislators from accepting campaign contributions during the regular legislative session.

WEST TEXAS OIL AND DRUGS: A TOXIC MIX AS DOLLARS FLOW INTO THE PERMIAN BASIN, DANGEROUS SUBSTANCE ABUSE INCREASES



THE 'HONESTY' DON'T MIND DRUGS IS BEING SO OVERWHELMED BY THE MONEY...

Congress defies Trump

Deal reached on Russia sanctions, limiting president

By Matt Fitzgerald and David E. Sanger

WASHINGTON — Congressional leaders have reached an agreement on reviving executive legislation to restrict Russia's access to the defense industry.

THAT'S HOW I DON'T MIND DRUGS IS BEING SO OVERWHELMED BY THE MONEY... THESE ARE ALWAYS COMMON THESE ARE ALWAYS COMMON... 'I'M NOT GOING TO DO IT, I JUST FEEL LIKE I'M GOING TO DO IT, I JUST FEEL LIKE I'M GOING TO DO IT...

I just don't want this thing to change my life

Houston dad battles aggressive brain cancer that has hit McCain

Ben Anderson was 38-year-old father proud over and over to see his young son, Thursday morning, eyes closed, praying this wouldn't be the day to lose his family.

McCain has been diagnosed with glioblastoma, a deadly brain cancer that has hit McCain.

FROM THE COVER Drugs are easy to come by in the oil patch



KEVIN TYSON FROM THE HOSPITAL. DOCTORS SAID HE WISHED TO END HIS LIFE.

Some 1,000 people have been through the doors of the Permian Drug Abuse Program in the first six months of the year, one in five of them addicts.

There's a lot of people to be made here because it's such high demand, he said. "People want it, and they want it fast."

Mark is housing? While the U.S. opioid epidemic has captured national headlines, the drug of choice in West Texas is methamphetamine.

Falling the test The first one on meth is this year, more than 1,000 people testing or applying for jobs in the Permian Basin.

Drugs and drilling The Permian Basin is a hotbed of drug use, and the industry is doing everything it can to keep it that way.

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July 23, 2017

OIL AND DRUGS: A TOXIC MIX

As dollars flow into permian basin, dangerous substance abuse increases

By Collin Eaton



MIDLAND — Eddy Lozoya never failed a drug test in the three years he hauled water and sand across the West Texas oil patch, even though he used at least \$200 a day in cocaine to keep his eyes open on brutally long days behind the wheel of a Kenworth T600 semitruck.

Lozoya, like his fellow truckers, found ways to beat the tests and to keep driving. Earning six-figure salaries, they consumed cocktails of drugs to push themselves to their physical limits on trips between scattered drilling sites that could last 36-48 consecutive hours. They would drive their 35-ton vehicles in tight, single-file formations, blowing air horns when the sleepest among them began drifting off the road.

“We always had cocaine,” he said.

Lozoya, a recovering addict at 23, is among the thousands of oil field workers who have succumbed to the mix of money, boredom and drugs that often accompanies energy booms. Drillers of all sizes have poured billions of dollars into the prolific Permian Basin this year, rebuilding operations after a two-year oil bust that devastated the region. But for all the economic benefits of the industry’s high-paying jobs, the oil rush again is bankrolling an expanding market for illegal drugs.

Law enforcement officials say drug trafficking, drug abuse and drug-related crimes have spiked in recent years, evidence that energy’s boom-and-bust cycles have had enormous social consequences in West Texas. Inside a small Nazarene church in Midland, converted a decade ago into a drug and alcohol addiction treatment center, the number of people seeking help is on track to more than double from



Steve Gonzales photos

“THEY HONESTLY DON’T MIND DRUG USE AS LONG AS YOU’RE NOT DOING STUPID THINGS.”

—Eddy Lozoya, 23, former oil field trucker



“THERE’S ALWAYS ONE COMMON THEME BEHIND ALL THIS STUFF, AND THAT’S MONEY.”

Robert Orosco Jr., 34, oil field equipment salesman



“I KNEW I WAS GOING TO DIE. I JUST FIGURED LET’S HAVE A GOOD HARD RUN. THAT’S WHAT I SET OUT TO DO.”

—Kevin Tyson, 55, oil field specialist

last year.

Some 1,200 people have come through the doors of the Palmer Drug Abuse Program in the first six months of the year, one in five of them under 18.

“We’re losing a generation of children to drugs and alcohol,” said Michele Savage, the longtime director of the program.

Lozoya knows drugs of all kinds are easy to find here. After an injury left him unable to drive commercial trucks, he found another lucrative trucking route, this time transporting narcotic pain medications and other drugs from his home state of California to West Texas. Here, he said, dealers can sell cocaine, marijuana and opioids for two or three times the price in neighboring states because of the remote location and the river of money flowing from the oil patch.

“There’s a lot of profit to be made out here because it’s in such high demand,” he said. “People want it here, and they’ll pay for it.”

‘Meth is booming’

While the U.S. opioid epidemic has captured national attention, the drug of choice in West Texas is methamphetamine, or crystal meth, a powerful stimulant oil field workers use to cope with long hours in the Texas heat, and one that is increasingly supplied through Mexican drug cartels, according to law enforcement officials. An analysis of data from the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Houston oil field services company Baker Hughes found a strong correlation between the rise of drilling activity and the number of crystal meth seizures in the area surrounding the Permian Basin. Between 2009 and 2016, as oil

companies dispatched more rigs into West Texas, the number of meth seizures rose sharply.

The rig count’s average of 103 in 2009 increased more than fivefold by 2014, the peak of the oil boom. In the same period, Texas state troopers saw meth seizures jump from 3 to 73 in the dozens of counties encompassing the Permian Basin.

CRS Diagnostic Service, a drug-testing company in Odessa, found the number of local workers who tested positive for methamphetamine in the first half of this year was more than three times higher than in the first half of 2009, shortly before the so-called shale oil revolution got underway.

“Meth is booming,” said Craig Smith, a senior vice president at the company.

For the oil industry, increased drug abuse in West Texas has exacerbated the struggle to find workers as they rebuild labor forces after widespread layoffs during the recent downturn. Patterson-UTI Energy, a Houston drilling and hydraulic fracturing contractor, has hired 4,000 people this year to fill jobs on rigs and fracking fleets, but more job applicants have failed drug tests this year than in 2014, said Diana Dotolo, the company’s vice president of human resources.

The Houston firm recruits workers from around the United States, but for local companies without a nationwide reach, the problem is far worse. Dynamic Oilfield Services, an oil-equipment company based in Corpus Christi, has seen roughly half of its job applicants from West Texas fail drug tests this year, and most of its employees in the region are hired from other areas.

Decades ago, biker gangs made meth from pseudoephedrine, a sub-

stance used in decongestants that was outlawed in Texas in the 1980s. Now, Mexican drug cartels dominate the commerce of meth, often transporting the substance in liquid form across the U.S.-Mexico border, stored in fake gasoline tanks, iced tea bottles or windshield washer fluid reservoirs, law enforcement officials said.

They take it to stash houses in places like Phoenix and Dallas before it reaches high-demand markets in West Texas, said Will Glaspy, special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Agency's El Paso division.

"Oil field workers are big consumers of methamphetamine," Glaspy said. "The Mexican cartels are the biggest sources of supply."

Across the West Texas and New Mexico counties that encompass the Permian Basin, the DEA has seized 2,200 pounds of meth since October 2015, more than triple the amount confiscated in between October 2011 and September 2013. Last year, the agency seized 66 pounds of methamphetamine in the Midland area, compared with 11 pounds in 2012.

"When the oil price is up, there's more methamphetamine in our entire community," said Steve Thomason, executive director at the Springboard Center, an alcohol and drug treatment facility in Midland. It's not uncommon, he said, to see a young oil field worker "roll up to outpatient treatment in a Corvette."

Failing the test

In the first six months of this year, more than 1,000 people working or applying for jobs in the oil-producing business failed urine-based drug tests, double the pace of failures last year,



EDDY LOZOYA DURING HIS DRUG USE DAYS. HE NOW SELLS WOMEN'S SHOES.



ROBERT OROSCO ON THE DAY HE TRIED TO KILL HIMSELF. HE'S A FEW MONTHS SOBER NOW.



KEVIN TYSON IN THE HOSPITAL. DOCTORS SAID HE WEIGHED 70-ODD POUNDS.

according to Houston-based DISA Global Solutions, the largest provider of drug-testing policies to U.S. oil producers.

The number of industry workers failing hair follicle tests, which are more effective in detecting long-term drug use, jumped to more than 4,600 over the past 18 months, tripling the number in the two years from 2009 to 2010; the number of people testing positive for methamphetamine jumped five times.

Large oil companies and oil field contractors said they have adopted tougher drug-testing policies in recent years. Houston oil producer Apache Corp., for example, conducts random, pre-employment, post-accident and reasonable-suspicion drug tests. If an employee or contractor fails a test, he could face termination.

"We are vigilant about ensuring a drug-free culture," said Castlen Kennedy, a spokeswoman at Apache.

But substance abuse specialists believe drug-test failure figures grossly underestimate the number of oil field workers who abuse drugs. Traces of methamphetamine, for example, linger in a person's system for only few days, making it harder to catch meth abusers. Several recovering drug addicts said managers in the oil patch tip off crews to a random drug test several days before it takes place, some to dodge fines by regulators, others to avoid having to hire new workers.

"There's a million and one ways to beat the drug tests," said Patrice Owens, director of the Greenhouse Outpatient Center, an Arlington addiction treatment facility. "If people want to use drugs, there's always a way."

Even if they get caught using drugs,

oil field workers often find their way back to the oil patch. For the seven years Cody Watson worked as an oil field electrician, using meth and cocaine as he worked nonstop for several days at a time when storms knocked out rig powerlines, it wasn't hard to pass drug tests because managers gave him and his crew plenty of advanced warning.

Once, after Watson smashed his finger with a pipe, a drilling company fired him when he came up positive in a post-accident drug test. He drove 18 hours across Texas for a job interview with another company, purging his system with water to erase any trace of drugs. He passed the pre-employment drug test.

"During the boom times, I could leave my job and there'd be plenty of places to work," said Watson, now a 41-year-old recovering addict. "A lot of these guys hop from one rig to another. It's a never-ending cycle."

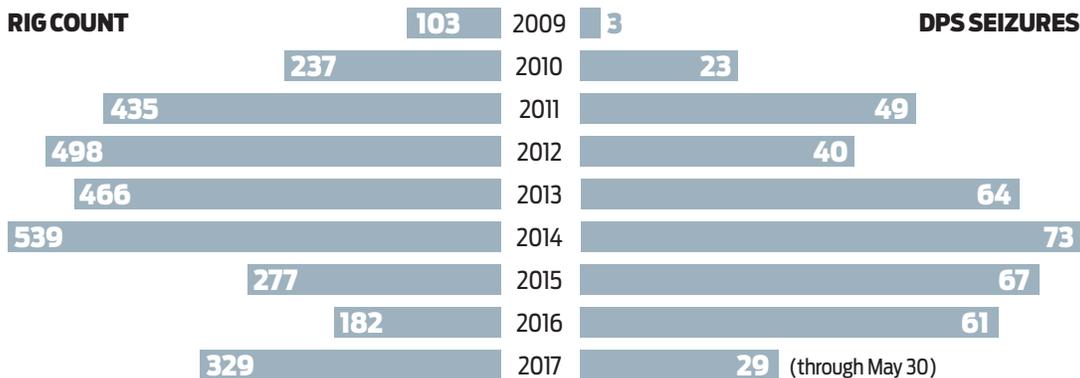
Breaking the cycle

Not long ago, drug use on a drilling rig was out in the open, said Kevin Tyson, a 55-year-old recovering addict. He recalled fellow rig workers tying a syringe filled with meth to a machine that pulls pipe out of the earth, then running it up to the derrick hand 90 feet above the rig floor, where the man took a hit.

Meth kept Tyson working and partying for years. They'd go on benders for days and didn't think much of it. Once, he missed a pipe he was supposed to catch. It swung right past him across the rig floor. Another guy smashed a coworker's hand with a sledgehammer. Some would die in oil field accidents, car wrecks or from overdoses. "Oh

Drugs and drilling

Data collected and analyzed by the Houston Chronicle show a strong correlation between drilling activity in and around the Permian Basin and the number of times state troopers seized crystal meth during traffic stops or large-scale drug busts.



NOTE: Population also was taken into account. Year-to-year population growth in the region was slight — less than 2 percent growth annually. Population growth would've had a minimal effect on the methamphetamine analysis.

Source: Analysis by the Chronicle's John D. Harden of data from the Texas Department of Public Safety and Baker Hughes

Houston Chronicle

well,” he said, “just keep going.”

Doctors told him he weighed 70-something pounds when he arrived at a hospital in Lubbock, where he spent a month in an intensive care unit. He has the paperwork, but he still doesn't know if that is true. One doctor said if he used meth again, he would die. He thought about that for a long time. Four months after his release, he got bored, called his buddy and started shooting meth again.

“I knew I was going to die,” said Tyson, who had worked in oil patch for 16 years before he began his recovery in November 2001, at age 39. “But I just figured, let's have a good hard run.”

The rules have changed since Tyson began his career, as companies impose stricter testing regimens. But the tough-guy culture still drives roustabouts, mechanics, truckers and rig hands to work long hours under grueling conditions and find ways to beat the tests. And sometimes, it drives

them to the breaking point.

In mid-April, around 2 a.m., Robert Orosco Jr. put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. The 34-year-old had lost everything to his relapse with Xanax, a highly addictive medication for anxiety, and cocaine. The drugs were so readily available, he could have them delivered. His wife had left him. He lost his house. He lost his job as an oil-equipment salesman. In every scenario he played out in his head, his six children were better off without him. The gun didn't fire.

Orosco checked himself in to a treatment facility the next day. Today, a few months sober, Orosco is building a new company that offers drone imaging to oil companies to identify leaks and assemble 3D maps of the earth's surface.

“The boom brings the good and the bad,” Orosco said. “There's so much here.”

Last month, Lozoya, the former oil field trucker, found a job at a local de-

partment store selling women's shoes for \$13 an hour, plus commission. He remembers his days as a 19-year-old earning paychecks that were five times larger than the average American his age and how he blew it all to feed a habit that eventually cost \$500 to \$1,000 a day.

He also remembers a downward spiral that cost him his job and led him to steal RVs, dirt bikes and even copper from the oil field. Several times, he nearly overdosed, and ultimately he sought help at a treatment center af-

ter his girlfriend and others persuaded him to get clean.

Today, he likes getting dressed up for work, with a suit, tie and well-groomed hair. He hopes to pursue a college degree and, perhaps one day, have his own clothing brand. And, for at least the next few months, he plans to heed the advice his counselors gave him: Don't go back to the oil patch.

"I don't see myself being able to work 100 hours a week sober," he said. "The oil field is tough."

John Harden contributed to this report.