



**SIERRA  
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13  
Houston Regional Group  
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713-895-9309  
<http://texas.sierraclub.org/houston/>

January 10, 2020

Oil & Gas EIS Project  
Mr. Robert Potts  
Natural Resources and Planning Team Leader  
National Forests and Grasslands in Texas  
2221 North Raguet  
Lufkin, Texas 75904

Dear Rob,

The Houston Regional Group and Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club (Sierra Club) provide this thirteenth set of comments for scoping for the U.S. Forest Service (FS) oil/gas leasing environmental impact statement (OGLEIS) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (NFGT).

Although the official scoping period is over, the Sierra Club will continue to send the FS documents and articles that relate to the OGLEIS. The Sierra Club has been told in the past that although there is an official scoping comment period, that scoping extends from the beginning of the scoping comment period until the draft EIS is released. There are additional articles that the Sierra Club provides to the FS with this letter.

1. "3 energy firms cutting 600 jobs", Jordan Blum and Sergio Chapa, Houston Chronicle, January 10, 2020.

This article affirms the "boom and bust" cycle for oil/gas with more layoffs of workers when it states, "Modest oil prices and spending cuts have contributed to the loss of nearly 5,000 oil and gas jobs in Texas from June through November, according to the Texas Workforce Commission."

2. "Occidental starting widespread layoffs", Jordan Blum, Houston Chronicle, January 9, 2020.

This article reports on how when oil/gas merges occur that layoffs of workers soon follow. This is one of the impacts that oil/gas has on people economically and socially.

3. "Report ties rise of pollution to Texas", Perla Trevizo, Houston Chronicle, January 9, 2020.

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." *John Muir* <sup>1</sup>

This article states, "Oil and gas industry expansions could add as much greenhouse gas pollution as the equivalent of 50 coal plants by 2025 – with much of that increase coming from Texas and Louisiana – at a time when pressure to slow down global warming rises, a new report found".

4. "Will 13 million barrels a day be lucky for American oil industry?", Jordan Blum, Houston Chronicle, January 6, 2020.

This article states, "An interesting dichotomy is plying out with the rising production and falling U.S. shale activity. The number of rigs drilling for oil and gas plunged by about 25% in 2019 because of modest oil prices, budget cutbacks and job reductions."

5. "2020 offers little promise for oil and gas", Chris Tomlinson, Houston Chronicle, January 6, 2020.

The article states, "The same supply and demand dynamics that crushed so many companies in 2019 show no signs of evolving, which is terrible news for the Texas economy."

6. "What does the future hold for the energy industry?", Rob Gavin, Business Editor, Houston Chronicle, January 6, 2020.

The article states, "The energy sector is coming off a year when prices stagnated, investors turned away and companies cut back".

7. "Earthweek 2019 Year in Review", Houston Chronicle, January 5, 2020.

This article reports that more than 11,000 scientists from 153 countries warned that "untold human suffering" is avoidable unless we make large and lasting lifestyle changes to curb global warming. The call to cut activities that contribute to climate change came as it became clear that the effects of global warming are worsening more rapidly than predicted ... the world can only avoid catastrophic effects of climate change by cutting carbon emissions by 7.6% each year until 2030."

The Sierra Club appreciates this opportunity to provide these additional initial scoping comments about the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the OGLEIS. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brandt Mannchen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "B".

Brandt Mannchen  
Forest Management Issue Chair  
Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club  
Chair, Forestry Subcommittee  
Houston Regional Group of the Sierra Club  
20923 Kings Clover Court  
Humble, Texas 77346  
281-570-7212  
[brandt\\_mannchen@comcast.net](mailto:brandt_mannchen@comcast.net)



# BUSINESS

HOUSTON CHRONICLE • FRIDAY, JANUARY 10, 2020 • SECTION B ★★

● **DOW:** 28,956.90, up 211.81 (0.7%) | ● **S&P:** 3,274.70, up 21.65 (0.7%) | ● **OIL:** \$59.56, down 5¢ (-0.1%) | ● **NATURAL GAS:** \$2.166, down 2.5¢ (1.2%)

## 3 energy firms cutting 600 jobs

Announcements come day after Oxy starts own layoffs

By Jordan Blum  
and Sergio Chapa  
STAFF WRITERS

Three Houston oil and gas companies Thursday said they would slash nearly 600 jobs in Texas, a day after Occidental Petroleum began a massive staff reduction.

Oil and gas producer Apache Corp. announced the largest of the cutbacks, saying it would eliminate more than 270 positions as it closes its regional San Antonio office.

Meanwhile, oil field services company Enterprise Offshore Drilling said it would lay off

around 60 workers, part of a planned release of a Gulf of Mexico oil rig.

A third company, Valerus Field Solutions, said it's closing an oil and gas equipment plant in Sealy, west of Houston, in March and eliminating about 250 jobs. Valerus is a division of SNC-Lavalin Group, the Montreal-based company that bought it in 2014.

Modest oil prices and spending cuts have contributed to the loss of nearly 5,000 oil and gas jobs in Texas from June through November, according to the Texas Workforce Commission. Thursday's announcements followed news that

Occidental began cutting workers in the wake of its August acquisition of The Woodlands-based Anadarko Petroleum.

Houston-based Apache said it is reducing its global workforce by up to 15 percent — about 500 jobs — as part of a broader restructuring announced late last year. The job cuts include those eliminated through attrition, but some of the San Antonio jobs will be moved to Houston or other offices, an Apache spokesman said.

The San Antonio closing and the 272 job cuts will be finalized in early March, according to a letter  
*Layoffs continues on B7*



Courtesy Apache Corp.  
Oil and gas producer Apache Corp. said it would eliminate more than 270 positions as it closes its regional San Antonio office.

### HOSPITALITY



Staff file photo

George P. and Cynthia Mitchell bought the former Leon & H. Blum Building in Galveston in 1985 and transformed it into The Tremont House, a high-end hotel.

## Mitchell estate sells landmark Galveston hotels

Buyer to close soon on two historic properties

By Nancy Sarnoff  
STAFF WRITER



## Trump's latest rollback eyes reviews of climate impact

Proposal favors pipelines, drilling

By James Osborne  
STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON — Federal environmental reviews for pipelines, oil and gas drilling and a long list of other federally-regulated projects would be scaled back under a sweeping proposal released by the Trump administration Thursday, including the end of a requirement that federal regulators consider the implications for climate change.

The proposed change to the National Environmental Policy Act, would require federal agencies, with few exceptions, to complete their environmental review within two years, dramatically speeding up a review process that can currently drag out up to a decade, experts said.

"We are certainly optimistic that the presumptive time limits can be met," said Mallori Miller, vice president of government relations at the Independent Petroleum Association of America.

The decision by the White House's Council on Environmental Quality is the latest in a series of regulatory maneuvers to try to reduce government over-

*Trump continues on B5*



David J. Phillip / Associated Press  
Former Enron finance chief Andrew Fastow, said he accepts responsibility for his actions.

Mitchell Historic Properties, the Galveston real estate arm of the late energy baron and developer George P. Mitchell and his wife Cynthia, is selling its two renowned Galveston hotels: the Hotel Galvez & Spa and The Tremont House, both historic properties and two of the most recognized landmarks on the island.

The buyer, an affiliate of Texas-based hospitality management and investment group SRH Hospitality Holdings, is expected to close on the properties in the first quarter of the year. Terms were not disclosed.

Mitchell Properties, owned by the estate of Mitchell, a billionaire who died at 94 in 2013, plans to contribute the majority of the proceeds to the Cynthia and George Mitchell Founda-



Courtesy

The Hotel Galvez & Spa was restored from a 1911-era Spanish Mission-style structure.

tion, which supports environmental protection, social equity and economic initiatives.

"It's big news for Galveston and big news for us. There's so much

emotion tied up in those properties," said Grant Mitchell, president of Mitchell Historic Properties, board chair of the family foundation and

*Mitchell continues on B7*

## Fastow says he thought himself a 'hero' at Enron

By Peter Flanagan  
BLOOMBERG

Andrew Fastow, who was at the center of the fraud which brought down Enron Corp., said he now accepts full responsibility for his actions after originally viewing himself as a "hero" while chief financial officer at the energy trading giant.

Enron used off-books partnerships Fastow created to hide billions of dollars in losses and debt, distorting the company's performance and inflating its share price. When the partnerships were revealed, Enron's stock nosedived, plunging the company into insolvency in weeks.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," Fastow told a packed audience at the Pendulum summit, which describes itself as a "Business and Self-Empowerment" event, in Dublin. "I thought I was being a hero." Fastow pleaded guilty to securities and wire fraud in 2004. Fastow testified extensively against Enron Chief Executive Officer Jeffrey Skilling at trial and was sentenced to six years in prison.

Today, Fastow says he accepts his actions were wrong. More than 5,000 jobs and \$1 billion in employee retirement funds were wiped out overnight when the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2001.

"I believe what I did was unethical and illegal," he said. "I take full responsibility for my actions and consider myself probably the person most responsible for Enron's failure."

Fastow, speaking on business ethics, quipped that his time in Dublin was bringing back memories.

"I haven't been in front of this many lights and cameras since the day I was indicted," he said.

## In Houston, renting looks more appealing

By R.A. Schuetz  
STAFF WRITER

Considering buying a home? It may be cheaper to rent, according to a new study.

In most markets, buying a home often results in lower monthly housing payments. In the nation's most populated counties — including Harris County — it turns out renting is the more affordable option, according to real estate analytics company ATTOM Data.

"(There) are distinct differences between different places, depending on the size and location

from core metro areas," Todd Tetta, ATTOM's chief product officer, said in a statement. For example, in the largely rural Liberty County, halfway between Houston and Beaumont, it is still cheaper to buy.

Wages in Harris County have increased at a quicker rate than rents. Home prices, on the other hand, have risen so rapidly that monthly payments on a median-priced home — \$251,000, according to the Houston Association of Realtors — would be more than the median rent for a three-bedroom rental.

*Rentals continues on B7*



David Zalubowski / Associated Press

In the nation's most populous counties, including Harris County, an analysis shows it is more costly to buy than to rent.

**BUSINESS**

**LAYOFFS**

From page B1

the company filed with the Texas Workforce Commission.

"Apache has already centralized key activities and seen positive results and is looking to take further steps in that direction," said company spokesman Phil West. "Staff reductions are always difficult, and we are working to support those employees who will be affected."

Apache had a difficult 2019, reporting a larger-than-expected \$170 million loss in the third quarter. Its stock price plunged more than 50 percent from late 2018 through a recent December low. The stock rebounded this week with the company's discovery of oil off the coast of Suriname in South America. The stock fell nearly 51% Thursday before rebounding to close down just 13 cents at \$32.60 per share.

The company expects to save \$150 million per year in its reorganization. In addition, Apache aims to slash capital spending this year by up to 20 percent – a cutback of \$250 million to \$500 million.

While Apache has a notable presence in South Texas' Eagle Ford shale closer to San Antonio, it has in-

creasingly turned to West Texas' booming Permian Basin for production. Apache could manage its Eagle Ford operations from Houston or even its West Texas hub.

While Apache's layoffs are aimed at cutting costs, the positions being cut by Enterprise followed an expected shutdown of a Gulf rig owned by EnVen Energy.

In a letter filed with the Texas Workforce Commission, Enterprise said it would layoff 61 workers aboard the rig, which is about 100 miles offshore. EnVen plans to cease operations at the end of January, Amy Warner, Enterprise's vice president of human resources, wrote in her letter to the state.

The layoffs began in November and are expected to be completed by the end of February.

In a statement, EnVen said the rig release was planned and followed the completion of a nearly two-and-a-half-year drilling program.

Privately held Enterprise launched in January 2017 and is headquartered in Houston's Energy Corridor. It provides crews for offshore drilling rigs and employs more than 500 workers.

Eric Douglas contributed to this report.

**MITCHELL**

From page B1

one of Mitchell's 10 children.

Mitchell said the hotels hold many memories of his parents. The decision to sell them was a difficult one.

The properties are still held in the Mitchell estate, and with much of the couple's wealth going to their foundation, continuing to own the hotels was not a viable long-term option, Mitchell said, adding that the siblings remain dedicated to continue their parents' legacy of giving back and enhancing the community.

"We love the hotels. They're successful and we have the privilege of being stewards of them," he said.

SRH's hospitality portfolio includes a half-dozen hotels throughout Texas, some of which are in development. The company is based in the Dallas area.

"We're keenly aware of Cynthia and George Mitchell's legacy and the family's importance to Galveston and the greater Galveston Island community," Paul Barham, CEO of Harrell Hospitality Group, a partner in SRH Hospitality, said in a press release released Thursday afternoon. "We understand this is no ordi-



The Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation in Galveston. Their estate's real estate arm is selling the Galveston hotel.

nary transaction and one that was not taken lightly by the Mitchells. It will be our honor and privilege to serve as the new stewards of these iconic landmarks, and we are looking forward to investing not only in the continued success of these historic properties but just as importantly in the Galveston community."

Galveston was George Mitchell's hometown and he and his wife always con-

sidered it a second home. Mitchell made a fortune in oil and gas and was a pioneer in the technology of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling, using it to tap oil and gas in the Barnett Shale of North Texas years before it unlocked a revolution in U.S. energy. He also developed The Woodlands, now a thriving master-planned community north of Houston.

As civic leaders in Galveston, the couple looked for ways to improve the town's economy and help restore its historic neighborhoods.

The Mitchells bought The Galvez, a 1911-era Spanish Mission-style structure, in 1993 and rehabilitated the property, restoring the main entrance and removing additions made between the 1950s and 1980s.

The 224-room property at 2024 Seawall Blvd. is a beachfront hotel with 13,000 square feet of meeting space, a spa, full-service restaurant and pool with a swim-up bar. It is appraised at \$17.3 million, according to the Galveston Central Appraisal District.

The Tremont House on Mechanic Street between 23rd and 24th is in the former Leon & H. Blum Building, which the Mitchells bought in 1985, transforming the 1897 property into a

high-end hotel. The 189-room hotel is appraised at \$6.2 million.

Both properties are affiliated with Wyndham.

Apart from the hotels, Mitchell Historic Properties owns about 20 other Galveston properties, including Pier 21 on Galveston's port and about 15 historic buildings in the downtown's Strand District.

The Mitchells began buying properties in downtown Galveston in the 1970s, when the now-bustling Strand area was a blighted part of town.

"A lot of it was boarded up and abandoned," Mitchell said. "They began to purchase and revitalize those buildings to light the spark of development."

Mitchell said the family is still evaluating plans for the remaining properties. While nothing has been finalized, he said there could be ways to fill underutilized space in the downtown buildings, citing such ideas as incubators, coworking space and workforce housing.

"As a family, our intent is for these properties to be leveraged for the greatest social impact for the city," he said. "We're figuring how to get that done."

nancy.sarnoff@chron.com  
twitter.com/nsarnoff

**LIFE TRIBUTES**

**MRS. DORIS MCNEIL ROBERTS**  
1924-2020

passed away on Monday, January 6, 2020. There will be a wake service on Friday, January 10, 2020 from 7:00pm to 9:00pm in the Memorial Chapel of Johnson Funeral Home. The Celebration of Life Services will be on Saturday, January 11, 2020 at 11:00am at Jerusalem Baptist Church 2205 Tuam St. Houston, Texas 77004. Pastor Donnie Simpson, officiating. The interment will follow at Paradise South Cemetery.



**Johnson**  
7730 Galhoun  
713-747-9604

**STEPHANIE RAE THOMPSON**  
1943-2019

It is with great sadness we announce the passing of Stephanie Rae Thompson on December 28, 2019 in Houston, TX. A loving and wonderful mother, sister, grandmother and friend. Stephanie was born in New Britain, Conn Nov. 22, 1943 to Richard and Muriel Leach. Stephanie will be missed by

her loving brothers Peter and Joe, her children Robin, Karen (and husband Steve Barrett), Bruce as well as her three grandsons; Nathan, Brad and Weston. There will be a memorial at a dear friend's home 9007 Danlap Houston, TX 77074. In lieu of flowers donations in her name to your local animal shelter would be appreciated. Questions or comments can be sent to bruceant@gmail.com

**NARCISSE WINTERS**  
1934-2020

A retired teacher at Booker T. Washington High School, she passed away on January 5, 2020. Her wake service will be held on Friday, January 10, 2020 from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. The funeral service will be held on Saturday, January 11, 2020 at 1:00 PM with a 12:00 PM viewing. All services will be held at Evangelist Chapel AME Church, 8401



**MARY NELL COLVIN**  
1940-2019



79, passed Friday December 13, 2019. Funeral Services are Friday January 10, 2020 at 11:00 am at McCoy & Harrison Funeral Home, 4918 Martin Luther King Blvd., Interment Brookside Memorial Park.

**MH**

McCoy & Harrison  
FUNERAL HOME, INC.  
912MCKAY - (713) 436-7418  
Cremations also at www.mccoyandharrison.com

**VIRGINIA GRANT**  
1946-2019



Virginia Marie Johnson Grant, expired (Tuesday) December 31, 2019. Visitation

**CHARLES MALLET**  
1946-2020



It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of Charles "To-Tan" Mallet who expired (Wednesday) January 8, 2020. Services are pending and will be announced when they are finalized.

**Lony B. Smith**  
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES  
11023 STEWART ST. HOUSTON, TEXAS 77036  
713-234-8888 (M-F) 713-234-1888 (S)

**PAMELA STEPHENSON**  
1961-2020



Pamela Stephenson, expired (Saturday) January 4, 2020. Visitation will be held (Saturday) January 11, 2020 from 10-10:55a.m. Service at 11:00

**RENTALS**

From page B1

Teta said both buying and renting are straining budgets for many throughout the country.

George Ratu, an economist at real estate listing company Realtor.com, agreed, saying rising housing costs are taking up so much of American's budgets he is concerned it could hurt consumer spending – which accounts

putting up affordably priced homes. KB Home's Westview Landing offerings – homes for sale in North Houston starting in the high \$100,000s – far outlast any other line of newly built homes in the city.

The region's homebuilders have been searching for ways to bring prices down, Dean said. "Whether that's smaller homes, homes on smaller lots, homes that are farther and farther out in locations

Hondo St., Houston, Texas 77051, Reverend Brenda Johnson, officiating. The interment will be held at Houston Memorial Gardens Cemetery (Pearland, Texas).

**BERNADEAN CAMPBELL**

1950-2020



Bernadean Campbell, 69, passed away on January 4, 2020. Visitation Saturday, January 11, 2020 beginning at 10:00 am followed by funeral service at 11:00 am at St. James Episcopal Church, 8129 Southmore Blvd., Houston, Texas 77004. Rev. Victor Thomas, officiating. You may sign the guestbook and order flowers at [www.carlbarnesfuneralhome.net](http://www.carlbarnesfuneralhome.net)

**Carl Barnes**  
744 West 21st Street - Houston, Texas 77008  
(713) 492-4529 - Serving Houston since 1932  
[www.carlbarnesfuneralhome.net](http://www.carlbarnesfuneralhome.net)

**MH**  
**McCoy & Harrison**  
FUNERAL HOME, INC.  
6918 MARY - (713) 639-7613  
[www.mccoypandharrison.com](http://www.mccoypandharrison.com)

**DORIS M. COLEMAN**  
1939-2020



Doris M. Coleman, expired (Friday) January 3, 2020. Visitation will be held (Saturday) January 11, 2020 from 10-10:55 a.m. Service at 11:00 a.m. Both services will be held at East Park B.C., 8602 Tidwell Rd., Bishop Ronnie Thomas, officiating. Interment, Harris Spring A.M.E. Cemetery (Brenham, TX).

**Tracy B. Smith**  
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES  
#1 SOUTH W. JAMES BLVD. (77301)  
3113A TEXAS AVE. (713) 741-9188

LAWRENCE D. SMITH, FIDELITYMUTUAL will be held (Friday) January 10, 2020 from 6-8:00 p.m. at the Troy B. Smith Professional Services Chapel, 9013 Scott St. Service will be held (Saturday) January 11, 2020 at 11:00 a.m. at St. Benedict Catholic Church, 4025 Grapevine St. Interment, Houston Memorial Gardens.

**Tracy B. Smith**  
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES  
#1 SOUTH W. JAMES BLVD. (77301)  
3113A TEXAS AVE. (713) 741-9188

**MR. HOMER CHARLES GUNLORY**  
1939-2020



passed away on Saturday, January 4, 2020. There will be a visitation on Saturday, January 11, 2020 from 10:00am to 11:00am in the Memorial Chapel of Johnson Funeral Home. The Celebration of Life services will begin at 11am following the visitation. Rev. Michael Jordan, officiating. The interment will be private.

**Johnson**  
5730 Calhoun  
713-747-9604

a.m. both services will be held at Windsor Village U.M.C., 6006 Heatherbrook Dr. Pastor Kirbyjohn Caldwell, officiating.

**Tracy B. Smith**  
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES  
#1 SOUTH W. JAMES BLVD. (77301)  
3113A TEXAS AVE. (713) 741-9188

**REV. CALVIN COOLIDGE STEWARD**  
1958-2020

He passed away on January 1, 2020. The visitation will be held on Saturday, January 11, 2020 at 1:00 PM with the funeral service beginning at 2:00 PM. Both services will be held at Bethany Baptist Church, 7304 Homestead Rd., Houston, Texas 77028, Dr. Steve W. Hall, officiating. The interment will be held on Monday, January 13, 2020 at 2:15 PM, Houston National Cemetery (VA).

**MH**  
**McCoy & Harrison**  
FUNERAL HOME, INC.  
6918 MARY - (713) 639-7613  
[www.mccoypandharrison.com](http://www.mccoypandharrison.com)

**CEMETERY LOTS**

Forest Park Lorraine & Plois, Sec. 32B, S 4, Lot 248, 57,000 Both + \$395 trans fee. 713-862-1323

*The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need. HE lets me rest in fields of green. HE leads me to quiet pools of fresh water. HE gives me new strength. HE guides me in the right paths as HE'S promised. Even if I go through the deepest darkness I will not be afraid, LORD, for you are with me.*

for 70 percent of America's economic activity - in 2020. Already, 17 percent of adults cannot pay their current month's bills in full, according to the Federal Reserve. An additional \$400 expense would push that figure to 29 percent.

In ATTOM's study, the company compared federal data for the median price of renting a three-bedroom home to the median wage. It used its own data for median home prices and assumed a homebuyer put 3 percent down on the home, which would result in higher monthly mortgage payments and the need for mortgage insurance.

ATTOM's findings fell in line with an analysis by economists at Florida Atlantic University. The Beracha Hardin & Johnson Buy vs. Rent Index compares the return on the purchase of a house against renting a similar-quality home and investing downpayment money in stocks and bonds. Recent numbers suggested renting in Houston makes more sense than buying than in any other market in the country.

Lawrence Dean, regional director of Metrostudy, a real estate data firm focused on new construction, said homebuilders are taking note. In 2019, builders saw the most success

where (it's) less costly... In one way that is a response to the potential that buying a home becomes too much more costly than renting a home."

**Investors take note**

Some investors are also cashing in on the demand for rentals. In recent years, investors have bought tens of thousands of single-family homes to rent. Houston is the fifth-largest market in the nation for single-family home rental company American Homes 4 Rent, which owns 3,300 homes in the area. It rents its average Houston property for \$1,648 a month, and renters who chose to renew their leases saw rents go up an average of 3.7 percent.

Homes are even being built to rent out instead of sell. Camillo Properties builds homes to rent throughout the Houston, San Antonio, Dallas and College Station areas. American Homes 4 Rent has also begun focusing on building its own single-family rentals.

Between 2 percent and 4 percent of single-family homes under construction are being built to rent, according to Metrostudy data.

rebecca.schuetz  
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[twitter.com/rschuetz](https://twitter.com/rschuetz)

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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

# BUSINESS

HOUSTON CHRONICLE • THURSDAY, JANUARY 9, 2020 • SECTION B \*\*

• **DOW:** 28,745.09, up 161.41 (+0.6%) | • **S&P:** 3,253.05, up 15.87 (+0.5%) | • **OIL:** \$59.98, down \$2.72 (-4.3%) | • **NATURAL GAS:** \$2.15, down 1¢ (-0.5%)

## Occidental starting widespread layoffs

Staff reductions from Houston to Denver take place in wake of Anadarko acquisition

By Jordan Blum  
STAFF WRITER

Occidental Petroleum started broad layoffs this week that will reach from Houston to Denver as the Permian Basin's leading oil producer aims to cut costs in the

aftermath of its massive \$38 billion acquisition of Anadarko Petroleum last year.

Oxy has for months offered voluntary employee buyouts and worked to sell assets around the world — from the old Anadarko headquarters in The Woodlands

to Anadarko's entire Africa portfolio. But now the Houston energy firm is moving on to terminating jobs, the company confirmed Wednesday.

"While these (voluntary) programs have been successful and contributed significantly to our goals, we have determined that additional staff reductions are necessary," Chief Executive Vicki Hollub said in an internal email to

employees. "A reduction in force program, based on business necessity by job, is being initiated with individual communications and exit dates."

Oxy refused to reveal job reduction numbers or goals, but employees this week have cited cutbacks occurring at Oxy's Greenway Plaza headquarters in Houston, the Permian Basin in West Texas, and its large hub in Denver.

Several employees anonymously posted updates on the website TheLayoff.com.

Oxy prided itself as one of the few energy companies to avoid job cuts during the most recent oil bust. But this time, layoffs were widely expected. Oxy and Anadarko had 16,000 employees combined before the merger, and Occidental told investors the

*Layoffs continues on B5*

## AT&T, Comcast raise cost of cable TV

Houston's biggest providers point to programming costs

By Dwight Silverman  
STAFF WRITER

Houston's biggest cable TV providers are increasing their prices, continuing a trend as the cost of providing programming rises and customers flee to streaming video services.

Comcast hiked the price of its basic cable TV fee by \$5 a month, and its Broadcast TV fee — a line item related to transmitting local broadcast TV stations over cable — went up by \$4.95.

Comcast also raised the rental fees for its voice and Internet modem/routers by \$1 a month. Most of its internet speed tiers increased by \$3 a month.

The increases took effect at the end of December.

Comcast had previously said it was making its Flex streaming box free to home internet subscribers. And at CES, the Las Vegas consumer electronics show, the com-

*Cable continues on B7*

## Home sales in December lift market

Housing purchases for 2019 hit record; outlook positive

By R.A. Schuetz  
STAFF WRITER

December home sales in the Houston area jumped 14 percent from the year before, capping a

### AIR TRAVEL



Steve Gonzales / Staff photographer

"It's proof of our devotion and dedication to Houston," Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly said at Wednesday's opening.

## Hanging around

Southwest Airlines opens its largest maintenance facility at Hobby Airport

By Andrea Leinfelder  
STAFF WRITER

Southwest Airlines' largest maintenance facility is now open in Houston.

The \$25 million, 240,000-square-foot facility opened Wednesday at Hobby Airport, boasting enough room to hold 14 Boeing 737 planes — six inside the hangar and eight more outside — as the airline looks for continued growth in Houston.

"It's proof of our devotion and our dedication to Houston," Southwest CEO Gary



People tour Southwest Airlines' new \$25 million maintenance facility Wednesday at Hobby Airport.

Kelly said during a grand opening celebration. "And the opportunity that we see here, and the excitement that we have to continue to grow."

The maintenance facility has 140,000 square feet of hangar space and 100,000 square feet for offices, parts storage, paint booth and other support areas. Outside the hangar is 450,000 square feet of apron paving and two wash stations.

The facility's nearly 400 employees will be capable of conducting a wide variety of

*Facility continues on B7*

Houston couple asks

dramatic turnaround over the course of 2019.

The year's home sales set a new record, outdoing 2018's previous record by 4 percent, according to Houston Association of Realtors data released Wednesday. More than 102,500 homes were sold in Houston in 2019, the first time the city has broken the 100,000 threshold.

"During the latter half of 2019, we had a sense that we were headed toward a record year for Houston real estate, but no one expected it to be this strong a finish," John Nugent, the association's chair, said in a release.

The housing market in December was very different than that of the year earlier, when mortgage rates drifted up toward seven-year highs and the upward march of

*Housing continues on B7*

## HOUSTON COUPLE ASKS \$5.7M for historic River Oaks mansion

By Nancy Sarnoff  
STAFF WRITER

When Florence Langford was shopping for a house for her family in River Oaks, the 80-year-old Colonial Revival on Inwood instantly brought back memories of where she grew up, a stately old home in the Dallas neighborhood of Highland Park.

Langford was charmed by the built-in bookshelf halfway up the staircase, the plaster ceiling medallion encircling the dining room chandelier, the wood-paneled ele-

vator that still worked. Like her childhood home, the one on Inwood had grandeur, but it wasn't cold or intimidating.

"There's just something genteel about it that a lot of these new homes try to replicate but really can't," she said.

She and her husband Tom, an investment banker, bought the River Oaks home in 2007 and spent nearly two years renovating it.

This week they listed it for sale. They are asking \$5.75 million for

*House continues on B5*



TK Images

Tom and Florence Langford are listing the River Oaks house they bought in 2007 and spent two years renovating.

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**BUSINESS**

**LAYOFFS**

From page B1

merger would yield significant savings – which typically means job cuts.

All of the new layoffs could be announced by the end of this week, Hollub said in the email to employees.

“Staff reductions are always difficult, and we feel for those employees and their families who will be affected,” Hollub added. “However, for the long-term success of the company, we must take appropriate action to compete in our transforming industry and achieve the synergies announced at the time of the merger.”

She said Oxy would not have any layoffs within its petrochemical arm, called OxyChem, or in the Gulf of Mexico division that was acquired from Anadarko. Few jobs will be cut internationally.

That would make Texas and Colorado the most exposed to job reductions.

**Stock recovers**

In a prepared statement Wednesday, Oxy spokeswoman Melissa Schoeb said Oxy’s integration team worked for months to identify the positions needed to successfully and safely operate its business while still achieving its cost reduction goals.

“We reduced the workforce significantly with voluntary separation packages, and to attain the integration goals, we implemented a non-voluntary program to further reduce staffing,” Schoeb said. “We recognize this will have an impact on our employees and will do what we can to provide assistance during through the process.”

Oxy’s stock value suffered after it outbid Chevron to buy Anadarko, with shareholders concerned the company was overpaying, taking on too much debt and betting too heavily on higher oil prices moving forward. The stock value dropped almost 45 percent from April to a December low of about \$37 per share.

Famed activist investor Carl Icahn even waged an unsuccessful proxy war – thus far – to oust Hollub and much of the Oxy board. Oxy took on about \$40 bil-

lion in debt to close the deal, including new loans and the assumption of Anadarko’s existing debt.

Oxy’s stock has since ticked back up to roughly \$45 a share; it closed at \$44.98 Wednesday, down 29 cents a share. Oxy’s market capitalization value is \$38 billion – the same amount it paid for Anadarko.

This week, Oxy said it would make its pipeline arm, Western Midstream Partners, an independent company and reduce its ownership stake in the firm to cut its debt. Oxy acquired Western as part of the Anadarko deal and a potential sale was considered one of the best ways to help Oxy pay off the deal. Western’s market value, however, plunged by about 30 percent last year, putting a sale on hold. Western’s market value is currently about \$10 billion.

Oxy instead said it would reduce its roughly 55 percent stake in Western to below 50 percent this year and make the pipeline firm fully independent. The deal would let Oxy take Western’s nearly \$7.5 billion debt off of its books while still allowing Oxy to maintain an operational relationship with Western and its pipelines and processing capabilities.

**\$15 billion plan**

Oxy said last week it would sell the twin-tower Anadarko headquarters in The Woodlands – while leasing back one tower – and the old ConocoPhillips campus in the Houston Energy Corridor for a combined \$565 million to the Howard Hughes Corp. to help further reduce debt. Oxy had originally intended to move its headquarters to the former Conoco campus but nixed those plans after buying Anadarko, deeming the campus too small to accommodate everyone.

Oxy will maintain a smaller presence in The Woodlands as well as its current headquarters in Houston’s Greenway Plaza.

The biggest part of Oxy’s debt reduction thus far is the \$8.8 billion sale of Anadarko’s Africa assets to the French energy major Total as part of a larger \$15 billion divestment plan.

*jordan.blum@chron.com  
twitter.com/jdblum23*



The towers and campus of Anadarko in The Woodlands were acquired by Occidental Petroleum, which has now sold them. Michael Wyle



The six-bedroom home was designed by Hiram Salisbury and T. George McHale. TK Images

**HOUSE**

From page B1

the six-bedroom home, which was designed by Hiram Salisbury and T. George McHale, designers of numerous homes in River Oaks and Southampton, as well as St. John’s School and the chapel at St. John the Divine in association with MacKie and Kamrath Architects. It is designated as a historic landmark by the city of Houston.

The Langfords – who will both be 61 next month – are selling because their children are grown and they recently bought a ranch northwest of their hometown of Dallas where they have started spending more time. They also own a home in Connecticut.

The couple hopes whoever buys the house appreciates its value as a historic property. But they know that’s not a guarantee.

“I tell you, it’s painful to put it on the market because we have loved every minute in this house,” Florence Langford said. “I hope somebody will appreciate it as much as we have and won’t come in and decide they’re going to tear it down.”

Langford has seen too many homes in her neighborhood torn down. Her family went to their ranch for five days at Christmas and when they returned, a house across the street was gone.

When she thinks about the same fate befalling her own home, she is reminded of when her mother sold the family’s house in Dallas.

“My mother just said, ‘I’m not even going entertain an offer from anyone who’s considering tearing



The city designated it a historic landmark. “I hope somebody will appreciate it as much as we have,” Florence Langford said.

it down,” she said.

The Langfords applied for the historic landmark designation from the city of Houston when they bought the house and planned to renovate it. By doing so, they’ve gotten a break on their city property taxes each year since.

Buildings the city deems as historic landmarks can qualify for the tax exemption through the city’s Economic Development Division, which offers the exemption to incentivize historic renovations.

The value of the exemption is based on how much the owners spend to renovate the property. It generally equates to the value of “qualified expenditures” and expires after 15 years.

Before they moved in, the Langfords redid the kitchen and bathrooms and put in all new plumbing, electrical and HVAC systems.

They replaced the swimming pool in a way that would reflect the original design.

“We wanted the house inside and outside to feel exactly the same as it was when it was built,” Langford said.

Completed in 1939, the white brick home with six hand-hewn Doric columns sits on a half-acre lot and fills 9,270-square-feet. It was designed for Bessie and Conway Blume, an arborist and entrepreneur.

Patricia Reed, the agent listing the house, said the home has character that most builders can’t recreate.

“It’s just a grand old home,” said Reed of John Daugherty Realtors. “You feel kind of like you’re stepping back in time.”

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## Report ties rise of pollution to Texas

Greenhouse gas from oil projects would equal 50 new coal plants by 2025

By Perla Trevizo  
STAFF WRITER

Oil and gas industry expansions could add as much greenhouse gas pollution as the equivalent of 50 coal plants by 2025 – with much of that increase coming from Texas and Louisiana – at a time when pressure to slow down global warming rises, a new report found.

Over the next five years, the industry plans to build or expand 157 plants, in addition to more drilling that could release up to 227 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions – up to 30 percent more than 2018, according to the Environmental Integrity Project's new report, "Greenhouse Gases from Oil, Gas, and Petrochemical Production."

Although greenhouse gas emissions in the United States fell about 2 percent last year, mostly as a result of a decrease in coal consumption, that modest progress is being undercut by the expansion in the oil and gas industry, said Eric Schaeffer, executive director of the Environmental Integrity Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that advocates for enforcement of environmental laws. It was founded in 2002 by former Environmental Protection Agency attorneys.

"We think this is the fastest-growing source of greenhouse gas emissions and that the amount that's already here and what is likely to be added into the atmosphere is pretty alarming,"

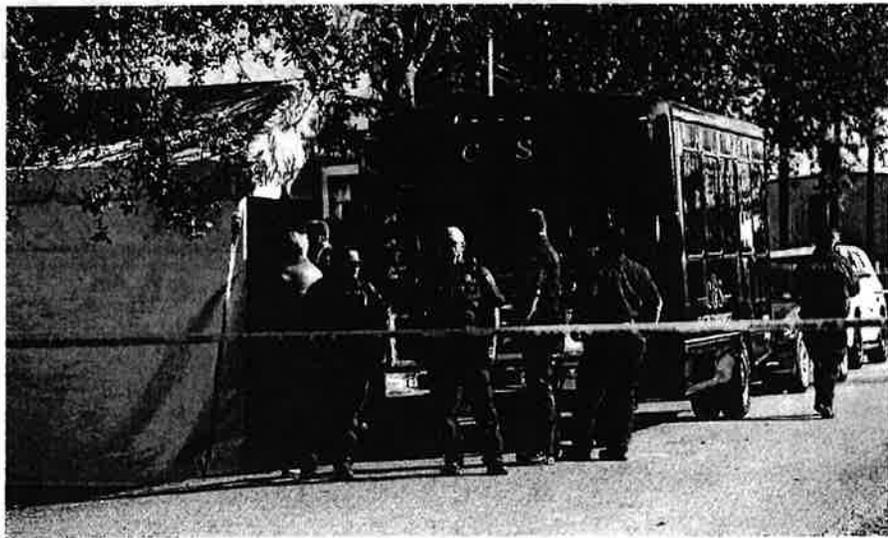
*Emissions continues on A9*

## Judge ordered back on ballot

Dems had denied Powell application over fee technicality

By Samantha Ketterer  
STAFF WRITER

# Jurors tour site of fatal Harding St. drug raid



Marie D. De Jesus / Staff photographer

Grand jurors arrive in a tour bus to 7185 Harding St. on Wednesday in Houston. The house is the site where two Houston homeowners were shot to death and five officers were injured during a botched drug raid on Jan. 28, 2019.

By St. John Bamed-Smith  
STAFF WRITER

A covered walkway has been set up at the south Houston home where nearly a year ago Houston narcotics officers launched an ill-fated drug raid that ended in the deaths of two homeowners, injuries to five officers, and mired the department in scandal. According to law enforcement sources, grand jurors visited the site on Wednesday.

The visit marked the first public indication that Harris County grand jurors have begun probing the case since prosecutors charged veteran narcotics officer Gerald Goines with murder in late August.

The veteran drug cop and his fellow officers launched a

no-knock raid on the home on Jan. 28, 2019, looking for heroin. Homeowners Rhogena Nicholas and Dennis Tuttle died in the operation.

Police didn't find any heroin, only small amounts of cocaine and marijuana, and relatives and neighbors disputed that the two individuals had dealt drugs.

In the weeks that followed, Police Chief Art Acevedo said Goines had lied about the drug buy used to justify the raid on 7815 Harding St.

The police department, the Harris County District Attorney's Office and the FBI all launched investigations into the raid.

As far back as July, a federal grand jury began probing the case. More than a dozen Houston

*Raid continues on A5*



A man secures the entrance to the property, where Rhogena Nicholas and Dennis Tuttle were killed. An HPD narcotics officer has been charged in their murder.

## Forum puts GOP candidate on defense over 2008 Dem vote

By Jeremy Wallace  
AUSTIN BUREAU

During the first Republican

party, but with no explanation allowed.

"2008 Democrats," Hunt told the standing room only, sold-out



Wesley Hunt is a front-runner in the GOP primary race for the 7th Congressional District.

longer for Democrats, as Republican John McCain had already locked up the GOP nomination. The goal, Limbaugh said at the time, was to "bloody up Obama

## 1 of 2 Jerry Garcias pulls out of race

Both identically named candidates

A civil court judge Wednesday ordered that sitting criminal district Judge George Powell be included on the March primary ballot after the Harris County Democratic Party denied his application for candidacy last month.

Party officials had to accept Powell's application within 24 hours, and he needs to appear as a choice for voters during the election, Judge Lauren Reeder ordered. But



Powell

the ruling is technically temporary and could be subject to appeal by the party or Powell's primary opponent, who was a third-party "intervener" in Powell's suit against the party.

"I'm very happy that the judge granted our request for an injunction and that he gets the chance to run again," said Kent Schaffer, Powell's attorney. "Ultimately, it's the voters who should decide who the candidate's going to be, and not a select few people who feel like it's their right."

During a Tuesday court hearing, the local chapter of the Democratic Party sought to justify its decision in leaving Powell off the ballot, urging him to take responsibility for his application's failure. A statement party officials issued after Wednesday's ruling made little mention of the outcome, however, and pointed to issues with the election code.

Party leaders weren't able to approve Powell's candidacy because  
*Judge continues on A5*

candidates' forum with all the competitors for Houston's 7th Congressional District, it didn't take long for Wesley Hunt to be put on the defensive over a vote he made almost a dozen years ago.

Barely halfway through the forum put on by the Greater Houston Pachyderm Club on Tuesday, Hunt and the other five Republicans were asked to tell the audience the last time they voted in a primary election, and for which

crowd of over 100 people.

Hunt said afterward it felt like a planted question aimed at him. He said back in 2008 he was doing what a lot of Republicans were doing then, participating in something called Operation Chaos. That was a strategy devised by conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, who called on Republicans in Texas to vote in the Democratic primaries for Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama to keep the primary season going

politically."

"I bet a lot of people in this room did the same thing," Hunt said, adding that he has no regrets over the vote.

Hunt said he didn't vote in subsequent primary elections in Texas because he went on active duty in the Army and went to Cornell University in New York for his master's degree and was not in the Houston area.

Hunt said he's always been a  
*Forum continues on A4*

## PLANNED CANDIDATES will still be on ballot

By Zach Despart  
STAFF WRITER

One of the two candidates named Jerry Garcia who filed to run for Precinct 2 constable — the one who did not appear to be actively campaigning — has withdrawn from the race, the Harris County Democratic Party said Wednesday.

A certificate of withdrawal signed by Garcia obtained by the Chronicle states that he ended his bid Monday.

His short, strange trip as a candidate is not over yet, however. He will remain on the ballot for the March 3 Democratic Party primary, though votes for him will not count, Democratic Party spokeswoman Nisha Randle said.

Garcia, who is a cousin of Democratic incumbent Constable Chris Diaz's wife, was one of two men who had filed for the seat bearing the same name as the late Grateful Dead guitarist.

The other Jerry Garcia said the turn of events is further evidence the former candidate never intended to mount a serious campaign. That Garcia, a lieutenant in a neighboring constable precinct, alleges the incumbent Diaz pushed his wife's cousin to run solely to confuse voters, ensuring his re-election. Diaz's wife, Ana Diaz, also is the mayor of San Jacinto City, a post her husband held from 2009 to 2011.

*Garcia continues on A4*

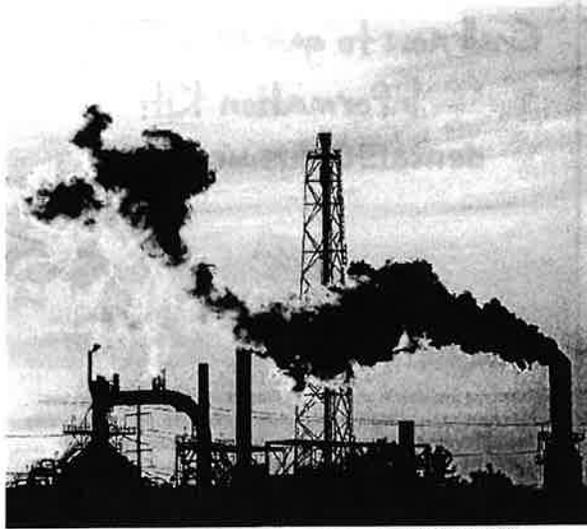


Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

## Skating in the sunshine

Breone Airall takes advantage of Wednesday's nice weather to skate around Discovery Green in downtown Houston. "Four-wheel skating is where it's at," she said, adding that she was trying to get another day of skating in before rain hits the area later this week.

CITY | STATE



Jon Shepley / Staff photographer

Motiva Enterprises, which operates The Port Arthur Refinery, has been projected as a top polluter of greenhouse gas emissions.

**EMISSIONS**

From page A3

Schaeffer said.

Reid Porter, a spokesman for the American Petroleum Institute, said that the industry is improving in controlling emissions. "Industry initiatives, including efforts like The Environmental Partnership," Porter said, "underscore the industry's commitment to leveraging new technologies and innovative practices that reduce emissions and establish clear pathways for continuous environmental improvement." The Partnership is an industry group that focuses on finding best practices to reduce emissions.

For its analysis, EIP focused on companies that extract or refine oil and gas, export liquefied natural gas, or manufacture petrochemicals, plastics, or fertilizers. The group based its data on industry reports to the EPA, the Department of Energy's estimate of future oil and gas production, and from permits that authorize increased emissions from proposed oil, gas, and chemical projects. It doesn't include smaller projects that aren't required to obtain permits that limit greenhouse gases.

The United States has become a global leader in oil and natural gas production, and the industry has been a huge boon to the Texas economy, creating jobs and spurring economic growth. But it comes with consequences, in the form of both greenhouse gases and pollutants known to harm human health, said Courtney Bernhardt, director of Research at the Envi-

ronmental Protection Agency. Scientists have linked climate change to bigger and more frequent storms, as well as increased temperatures and more intense droughts. For instance, Tropical Storm Imelda, which dumped as much as 43 inches of rain in some parts of southeast Texas, was twice as likely and 10 to 15 percent stronger due to climate change, according to scientists at Texas A&M and the University of Oxford in the UK.

About half (76 of the 157) of the future projects analyzed by the EIP are planned for Texas and Louisiana, which together could produce 75 percent of the expected increases from new oil and gas-related projects across the United States.

The Permian Basin in Southeast New Mexico and West Texas, which is now the most productive oil field in the world, produced over 4.3 million barrels per day on average in 2019 and accounted for approximately 50 percent of U.S. oil production, according to EIP. Reported greenhouse emissions from companies operating in the Permian Basin have more than doubled from 10.5 million tons to 25.3 million tons between 2012 and 2018, the group said.

Porter, the American Petroleum Institute spokesman, said that emissions of methane — a greenhouse gas that is 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide in the first two decades after its release — in the Permian Basin have decreased over a similar period (201-

2018), the overall amount of greenhouse gases emitted by the oil, gas and petrochemical industry increased 8 percent, or 57 million tons, between 2016 and 2018, according to EIP's report.

"It's all about the tons in the end," said Schaeffer, former director of civil enforcement at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Jim Blackburn, co-director of Rice University's Severe Storm Prediction Education and Evacuation from Disasters (SSPEED) Center, said these figures are not acceptable.

"It indicates the oil and gas industry needs to start coming up with a plan to capture and remove carbon emissions," he said.

**'Heads in the sand'**

"They need to start doing something; we all do," he added. "The entire society is going to have to start doing some type of removal activities for carbon dioxide."

Otherwise, he warned, some of these companies will become obsolete.

Many Texans should especially care, Schaeffer said. "You are going to be underwater unless you live in a houseboat."

A lot of these facilities are being built at sea level, he said, and "I'm not sure the infrastructure is being hardened to withstand the impacts of climate change."

The Gulf of Mexico, where 44 percent of U.S. oil refining capacity is located, could see 4 feet of sea level rise between now and 2100, the EIP said in the report, leading to flooding that could severely hamper refining operations.

Among the group's recommendations: that state

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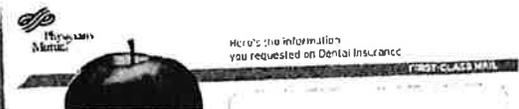
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ronmental integrity project.

According to the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the world must reduce emissions of greenhouse gases to net zero by 2050 to have a shot at limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

**Houston ranks at top**

Texas has the highest emissions from coal, petroleum and natural gas of all the states, according to the U.S. Energy Department.

Houston takes the top spot when measured per capita. In 2014, Houston residents and businesses generated nearly 35 million tons of greenhouse gases through carbon-fueled buildings, cars and waste. If nothing is done, city off-

ices) relative to production.

Some of the world's largest companies have pledged to reduce emissions and are increasingly openly recognizing the need to address climate change.

The American Fuel & Petrochemical Manufacturers didn't respond to a request for comment, but has said its "members are constantly innovating and seeking new ways to reduce emissions, including investing in carbon capture and storage projects, and new technologies to reduce flaring emissions and incidents."

The Houston Chronicle recently highlighted a partnership between Occidental Petroleum and the French energy major Total to capture carbon.

environmental agencies and the EPA to issue permits that include cost-effective measures to minimize greenhouse gas pollution, that Congress and states increase funding to environmental agencies, that the EPA improve its monitoring of emissions and that air pollution permits require fence-line monitoring to identify toxic concentrations of gases before they cross plant boundaries into nearby communities.

"We need permit limits that reflect the best industry can do not the most they can get away with," he said.

The fact that this is not already happening, he added, "suggests we still have our heads in the sand."

[perla.trevizo@chron.com](mailto:perla.trevizo@chron.com)

**Producing pollution**

Future petrochemical and plastic projects with potential to emit the most greenhouse gases in Texas:

COMPANY	CO2e (TONS PER YEAR)	OPERATIONAL STATUS	YEAR OPERATING OR EXPECTED COMPLETION
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Fomosa Plastics Corporation	3,868,872	Commissioning	2019
Gulf Coast Growth Ventures (GCGV) Asset Holding (ExxonMobil & SABIC)	2,933,595	Pre-Construction	2022
INEOS Olefins & Polymers USA	1,772,804	Under Construction	2019
Chevron Phillips Chemical Company LP	1,737,346	Pre-construction	2024

Source: Environmental Integrity Project

Staff

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## FUELFIX NOTEBOOK

# Will 13 million barrels a day be lucky for American oil industry?

In late 2017, the United States crossed the threshold of producing 10 million barrels of crude oil per day and hasn't looked back, surpassing Russia and Saudi Arabia as the world's largest energy giant.

That 10-million-barrel mark was one reached only once before, during a brief one-month



JORDAN BLUM

blip way back in 1970. The United States lost its position as the top oil producer in the 1970s, and it once seemed like the country would never get there again.

After all, as recently as a decade ago, the nation was only churning out about 5 million barrels of oil per day, which is only marginally more than Iraq's output. The shale revolution changed all of that as its focus switched from natural gas to crude oil.

Now, we enter 2020 on the verge of surpassing 13 million barrels of oil daily — more oil than any nation has ever produced.

The question now is whether 13 million barrels is an unlucky number.

An interesting dichotomy is playing out with the rising production and falling U.S. shale activity. The number of rigs drilling for oil and gas plunged by about 25 percent in 2019 because of modest oil prices, budget cutbacks and job reductions.

U.S. shale output is slowing mightily, but it's still ticking upward. At some point, a reckoning will come when U.S. output finally peaks and falls. But we're not there yet, and we may not get



Jim Wilson / New York Times

The United States is on the verge of producing more oil than any country ever has.

there in 2020, since oil producers have learned to drill more wells more quickly with each rig and cut costs.

The 13-million-barrel threshold could be surpassed any day now, or it could take several more weeks, but the U.S. Energy Department projects the country to average 13.2 million barrels a day for the entirety of 2020. That's after the U.S. entered 2019 at about 12 million barrels a day. The most recent monthly numbers, from October, show almost 12.7 million barrels a day, with weekly estimates now at 12.9 million barrels.

As the government forecasts, "Production will continue to grow as rig efficiency and well-level productivity rises, offsetting the decline in the number of rigs."

The U.S. benchmark for oil prices is hovering above \$60 per barrel and showing signs of relative health for the first time in months, but energy companies need a sustained period with oil well above \$60 to really feel healthy again.

The price jumped above \$63 on Friday after President Donald Trump ordered the targeted killing of a top Iranian general and an allied Iraqi militia leader,

stoking concerns of a broader conflict.

The so-called OPEC+ group — a Saudi-led cartel that includes Russia and smaller allies as well as OPEC nations — is helping prop up prices by cutting back production more than anticipated for the first quarter of 2020, but it's likely a short-term fix. It's unknown what they'll do next.

At the same time, they're largely just offsetting a new surge of oil from non-OPEC countries, especially Norway, Brazil, Canada, Guyana and the still-rising U.S. shale.

Or, on a more micro level, if

U.S. production growth stalls, it would help boost crude prices. More U.S. output would keep prices down.

As always, it's a tricky balance. And what's good for the Houston energy sector isn't necessarily good for American consumers, who appreciate the cheaper gasoline that comes with lower oil prices.

So maybe it is true that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Happy New Year.

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## TOMLINSON'S TAKE



New York Times file photo

## 2020 offers little promise for oil and gas

A new year often brings new hope, but not for the oil and natural gas industry in 2020.

The same supply and demand dynamics that crushed so many companies in 2019 show no signs of evolving, which is terrible news for the Texas economy. Professional analysts vary widely in their predictions for the energy industry, but few see any evidence for higher profits.

"Crude oil prices will be lower on average in 2020 than in 2019 because of forecast rising global oil inventories, particularly in the first half of next year," the U.S. Energy Department said last



CHRIS  
TOMLINSON  
*Commentary*

**The oil and gas rig count dropped 20 percent in 2019, according to Baker Hughes.**

month.

Politicians and industry boosters love to brag about how Texas ingenuity led to horizontal drilling and the hydraulic fracturing of shale rock to release valuable energy molecules. Today, Texas produces more oil and gas than ever. But the world does not need them.

Texas pumped an average of 3.3 million barrels a day of crude oil in September, according to the latest data available from the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates the state's oil and gas industry. Other non-OPEC sources could add another 1 million barrels

a day in the first half of 2020, according to the International Energy Agency.

To keep oil prices around \$60 for West Texas Intermediate, OPEC and its Russian allies are holding back 2.1 million barrels a day. If OPEC opened its taps, as they did in 2014, crude prices would likely drop more than \$10 a barrel.

Surplus inventory would usually signal it is time for producers to cut back. But months or years can pass between an oil company deciding to drill and the day that oil reaches the market.

Too many companies are also

paying bonuses for producing more energy rather than making a profit. CEOs are rewarded for selling a million barrels of \$70 oil into a market that will pay only \$60, even if it may bankrupt the firm.

Investors and banks are getting fed up. Oil company stocks are among the market's worst performers, and boards of directors are demanding profits. Banks are reducing lines of credit until companies generate enough free cash flow from operations.

Producing less oil, though, will not necessarily lead to higher

*Tomlinson continues on B7*



TEXAS INC.



New York Times file photo

Improved fuel efficiency is one of the challenges facing the oil industry.

*Tomlinson from page B6*

profits. Remember, the world's lowest-cost producers in the Middle East are holding back 2 percent of the world's oil supply. They will release those barrels when prices inch up to expand market share.

Industry optimists argue that growing demand will soak up the current surplus. They have been wrong for the past five years and are still wrong.

Crude rallied in December with news of a breakthrough in U.S.-China trade talks. A deal would allow regular trade to resume and consume a lot of petroleum.

Considerable gains in energy efficiency and non-petroleum alternatives have decoupled economic growth from fossil fuel consumption. Motor vehicles ranging from cars to Super-Panamax cargo ships are getting more miles or nautical miles to the gallon every day.

Consumers are also purchasing more electric vehicles and driving fewer miles. The average Amer-

ican is traveling 2 percent less than they did in 2004, according to the federal Department of Transportation and reporting by the Wall Street Journal.

Any significant rise in fuel prices would encourage Americans to drive less or purchase vehicles with lower operating costs. Gasoline and diesel are no longer the only two choices in transportation fuel.

Next year crude oil supplies are expected to grow by 2 million barrels, but demand will increase by only 1.2 million, the IEA said. In the longer term, most of the world recognizes we need to cut fossil fuel use to fight climate change.

Smart energy executives should not bank on tightening supply or growing demand to bring them profits. Many are already lowering production costs to survive a low-price future.

The oil and gas rig count dropped 20 percent in 2019, according to Houston oil field service company Baker Hughes, and energy firms slashed 5,000 jobs, according to the Texas

Workforce Commission. Texas job growth has dropped below the national average.

Texas must finally accept that the oil and gas industry was responsible for the so-called Texas economic miracle, and we can no longer depend on it. The impact of lower energy revenues will have ripple effects in every corner of the state.

Lost jobs in the oil patch mean people will buy fewer new pickups. Lower profits mean less spending on construction. Firms will contract for fewer engineering, legal and logistical services. State and local governments will see lower revenues from sales and severance taxes.

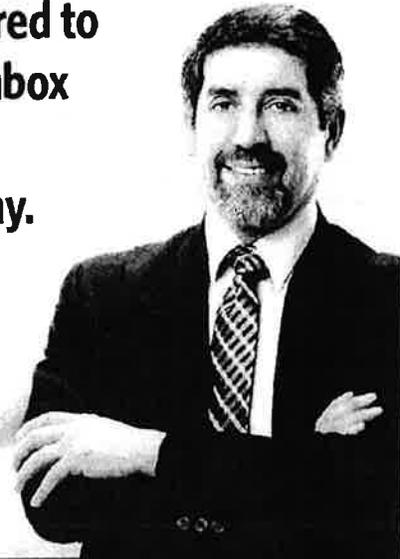
The best the energy industry should plan for in 2020 is a mini-oil bust. If there is a recession, even that will have seemed optimistic.

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# What does the future hold for the energy industry?

Happy New Year from Texas Inc.

We kick off 2020 with an issue that looks at the changes, challenges and advances that have shaped – and are still shaping – Houston's most important industry. The energy sector is coming off a year when prices stagnated, investors turned away and companies cut back, despite a rally, aided by escalating tensions with Iran. All that has pushed oil above \$60 a barrel.

Todd Staples, president of the Texas Oil and Gas Association, known as TXOGA, provides some perspective in an interview with Sergio Chapa that focuses on the trade group's 100 years representing the state's energy sector. Staples notes that the oil and gas industry has weathered more than its share of ups and downs, only to adapt, move forward and continue to pump billions of dollars into Texas' economy and support hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Over more than a century, Staples says, the oil and gas sector has transformed the state



Victor Lorenz / New York Times

Improved fuel efficiency is one of the challenges facing the oil and gas industry.

and nation, creating the type of opportunities that have moved families from poverty into the middle class. Despite growing concerns about climate change and pressure to dramatically cut

back on fossil fuels, he sees the future as bright for the industry, noting, among other things, that a variety of consumer goods and industrial components – including those used in solar pan-

els and wind turbines – are derived from oil and gas. The industry, he said, continues to invest in practices and technologies to reduce its environmental impact.

Chapa and contributor Rafa Farhah take their own look at technology, profiling digital workers who are becoming a larger and increasingly important part of the oil and gas industry's workforce. Instead of roughnecks and roustabouts in flame-retardant overalls and boots, a new cohort of tech workers is coming to the office in jeans, hoodies and designer shoes. Energy companies are making a major push to digitize and automate operations to reduce costs in the face of lackluster oil prices, and that push is driving the growth of six-figure tech jobs in oil and gas.

The industry is going to need all the help it can get, writes our columnist Chris Tomlinson. Technology and ingenuity have made the United States the world's biggest oil producer, Tomlinson argues, but the problem – which is only likely to get

worse – is the world just doesn't need all the oil that energy companies are pumping in Texas and around the globe.

From passenger cars to cargo ships, transportation is getting more fuel-efficient and consuming less petroleum. And that's not even considering the spread of electric vehicles.

"Industry optimists argue that growing demand will soak up the current surplus," he writes. "They have been wrong for the past five years and are still wrong."

Which brings us to another conundrum for the industry. Drilling activity is declining in the Permian Basin and other U.S. shale plays, but production keeps rising. In 2020, the United States is on track to produce more oil than any nation ever has, topping 13 million barrels a day. But, Jordan Blum asks in his reporter's notebook, will that be a lucky number for the industry? Welcome to Texas Inc.

Rob Gavin, business editor

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## WINNERS & LOSERS



### Winner

#### MARKETS

Both the stock and oil markets ended the year significantly higher after a trying 2019.



### Loser

#### PATIENTS

About 100,000 patients lost in-network access to Houston Methodist due to a contract dispute between the hospital system and UnitedHealthcare.

## DAILY DIGITAL



There's more Houston Chronicle-produced content waiting for you beyond the pages of today's newspaper. Here are some of the things you'll find online today at [houstonchronicle.com](http://houstonchronicle.com)

### BUILDING MOMENTUM

## DUCATI EXPANDS

Jason Chinnock, Ducati North America's chief executive.  
[HoustonChronicle.com/ducati](http://HoustonChronicle.com/ducati)





have been spotted, encompassing everything from government surveillance to alien activity. Others offered less-nefarious explanations, suggesting a private company is using them to map or survey land, or perhaps practicing for drone shows.

"There are many theories about what is going on, but at this point, that's all they are," Sheriff

post that they are operating in airspace controlled by the federal government and, as far as he could tell, abiding with federal regulations.

Yet the unexplained aircraft, buzzing above homes nightly, have still caused alarm — so much so that officials with multiple sheriff's departments have cautioned residents against shooting them

"I have been made aware of several comments about shooting down a drone," Morgan County, Colorado, Sheriff Dave Martin said in a statement. "I ask that you NOT do this as it is a federal crime."

Wyatt Harmon and his girlfriend, Chelsea Arnold, chased a cluster of drones after they flew over his property in the Colorado county of Washington. The couple

speeds above 70 miles per hour, according to the "Today" show, which featured an interview with the two on Dec. 31.

Harmon said during the interview that the aircraft could descend and take off "very fast."

"It's kind of just scary," Arnold added. "It's more unnerving than anything."

Another Colorado resident, Ha-

titable. Spokesman Ian Gregor said the timing of the proposed regulation, which was announced Dec. 26, was coincidental. It would allow drones to be tracked remotely, which would provide "critical information to law enforcement and other officials charged with ensuring public safety," the agency said in a summary of the proposal.

## EARTHWEEK | 2019 YEAR IN REVIEW

### Record lightning

A new report said that U.S. weather satellites detected the longest lightning ever observed — a 300-mile bolt from Texas to Kansas.

Other researchers measured the most powerful thunderstorm on record, with an electric potential of 1.3 billion volts in India.

### Plastic homes

A Mexican engineer has developed a process to recycle plastic into houses that may last for up to 150 years.

Ramón Espinosa's Eco Plástico Ambiental company converts the ubiquitous debris into strong sheets of "plastic wood" that can be used to build homes, furniture and other objects.

Plastic is now one of the world's most pervasive environmental pollutants.

### Magnetic shift

Earth's magnetic North Pole has drifted so much since 2014 that navigation aids were updated

In January and December to reflect the shifting position. The pole is racing toward Siberia from the Canadian Arctic.

### Tropical storms

Tropical Cyclone Idai's floods killed 1,300 people during March across Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe as one of the worst such storms to ever strike the region.

Hurricane Dorian inflicted catastrophic damage to the Bahamas on Sept. 1-2, while killing more than 60 in the country's worst-ever natural disaster.

Cyclone Fani killed nearly 90 people in eastern India and Bangladesh during early May, inflicting \$8.1 billion in damage.

Typhoon Lekima became China's second-most costly storm after it left 90 people dead along the east coast during early August.

Tropical Storm Iba became the third known tropical storm to form in the South Atlantic as it



### Spun up off Brazil on March 24, seaweed bloom

A huge belt of Sargassum seaweed, stretching 5,300 miles from Africa to the Yucatán Peninsula, became the largest such algae bloom ever observed. Climate change and runoff from agriculture are being blamed for the vast mats of seaweed that clog many resort beaches, especially along Mexico's Caribbean coast.

### Swine deaths

A quarter of the world's domestic pigs have died or been put down this year due to outbreaks of African swine fever, with China losing nearly half of its pigs.

There is no vaccine for the disease, making such outbreaks hard to prevent.

### Earthquakes

Albania's strongest earthquakes in almost 40 years, and the world's

most deadly during 2019, killed 51 people and caused extensive damage on Nov. 26.

A magnitude 5.9 temblor killed seven people, injured 300 others and wrecked three villages in Iran's East Azerbaijan province on Nov. 7.

Thirty people perished in three strong quakes that rocked the same area of the southern Philippine island of Mindanao during the latter half of October.

A magnitude 5.6 quake in Pakistan's Punjab province killed 40 people and wrecked thousands of homes on Sept. 24.

Forty people died as 6,000 buildings were wrecked and giant landslides were unleashed on Sept. 26 by a magnitude 6.9 temblor in Indonesia's Maluku province.

Southern California's strongest series of quakes in 20 years sparked fires during early July. The shaking was felt across a vast area from Las Vegas to Los Angeles.

### Climate emergency

More than 11,000 scientists from 153 countries warned that "untold human suffering" is unavoidable unless we make large and lasting lifestyle changes to curb global warming.

The call to cut activities that contribute to climate change came as it became clear that the effects of global warming are worsening more rapidly than predicted.

The U.N. later cautioned that the world can now only avoid catastrophic effects of climate change by cutting carbon emissions by 7.6 percent each year until 2030.

Earth Environment Service

**WEATHER**

**HOUSTON'S SEVEN-DAY FORECAST**

<b>73</b> 51 <b>TODAY</b> Plenty of sunshine	<b>72</b> 48 <b>MONDAY</b> Times of sun and clouds	<b>66</b> 38 <b>TUESDAY</b> Not as warm with plenty of sunshine	<b>66</b> 56 <b>WEDNESDAY</b> Increasing cloudiness	<b>74</b> 64 <b>THURSDAY</b> A couple of afternoon showers	<b>75</b> 54 <b>FRIDAY</b> Cloudy and warm with rain possible	<b>67</b> 45 <b>SATURDAY</b> A couple of a.m. showers possible
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**METRO AREA OUTLOOK**  
**TODAY:** Plenty of sunshine. High 70 to 73. Winds south-southwest 7-14 mph.  
**TONIGHT:** Clear to partly cloudy. Low 48 to 53. Winds south-southwest 4-8 mph.

**AIR QUALITY**  
 Today's forecast for the entire metro area by the TCEQ.

**Ozone watch**

- Good
- Moderate
- Unhealthy for sensitive groups
- Unhealthy
- Very unhealthy
- Hazardous

**POLLEN AND MOLD**  
 Yesterday's readings by the Houston Health Department.

Tree pollen	Medium	44
Weed pollen	Low	6
Grass pollen	None	
Mold spores	Medium	7334

Low     Heavy  
 Medium     Extremely heavy

**COMFORT INDEX**  
 The comfort index takes into account how the weather will feel based on a combination of factors. A rating of 10 feels very comfortable while a rating of 0 feels very uncomfortable.

Today	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.
10	10	10	10	10	10

**UV TODAY**  
 Values indicate the exposure to the sun's Ultraviolet rays.

8 a.m.	10 a.m.	Noon	2 p.m.	4 p.m.	6 p.m.
1	2	3	3	2	1

0-2 Low     6-10 Very high  
 3-5 Moderate     11+ Extreme  
 6-7 High

**SUN AND MOON**

**Sunset tonight:** 5:35 p.m.  
**Sunrise Monday:** 7:18 a.m.  
**Moonset today:** 1:46 p.m.  
**Moonrise today:** 2:15 a.m.

**NORTH AMERICA TODAY**



**INTERNATIONAL**

City	Today	Mon.
Africa		
Cairo	60/49s	63/50s
Cape Town	75/61c	76/62c
Sao Paulo	62/44s	61/45s
Dakar	70/66s	77/65pc
Johannesburg	84/60pc	83/62c
Lagos	92/70c	91/74pc
Asia/Pacific		
Beijing	40/30c	42/28c
Hong Kong	67/73pc	67/73pc
Manila	76/65c	76/65c
Seoul	50/43c	50/43c
Tokyo	50/36c	50/36c
Europe		
London	49/42c	49/42c
Paris	45/33c	45/33c
Rome	59/23s	59/23s
Stockholm	43/19c	43/19c
Vienna	39/23s	37/23s
Warsaw	39/23s	35/30c
Zurich	40/27c	40/27c
Latin America		
Bogota	70/44pc	70/44pc
Buenos Aires	64/60pc	64/60pc
Caracas	84/73s	84/73s
Havana	74/58c	74/58c
Kingston	86/75ch	86/75ch
Lima	77/61c	77/61c
Rio de Janeiro	81/71c	81/71c
Sao Paulo	84/74s	84/74s
Santiago	78/53s	80/55s
Sociedad	70/61c	70/61c
St. Thomas	84/74pc	83/74pc
Mexico		
Acapulco	86/74pc	86/74pc
Cancun	78/69pc	78/69pc
Guadalajara	73/63c	73/63c
Guatemala	70/35pc	71/46c
Managua	77/59pc	77/59pc
Merida	78/62pc	78/62pc
Mexico City	68/42pc	68/42pc
Puerto Vallarta	84/61c	83/61c
Tampico	74/54c	74/54c
Veracruz	75/60pc	75/60pc
Middle East		
Baghdad	63/41s	63/41s
Beirut	65/54s	65/54s
Dubai	63/69s	63/69s
Jerusalem	49/38sh	53/43s
Kabul	36/26s	34/18s
Mecca	80/56s	80/56s
Riyadh	63/40sh	63/40sh
Tehran	46/30s	46/30s
Tel Aviv	60/49c	60/49c

**FOR THE RECORD**

George Bush Intercontinental Airport through 3 p.m. yest.

Temperature	Degrees F
High	68
Low	40
Normal high	62
Normal low	43
Record high	79 in 1997
Record low	18 in 1911
Precipitation	inches
24 hours through 3 p.m. yest.	0.00
Month to date	0.31
Normal month to date	0.41
Year to date	0.31
Normal year to date	0.41

**Other readings**

Top wind speed	9 mph
High barometer	30.39 in.
Low barometer	30.20 in.
High dewpoint	40°
Low dewpoint	34°
Average dewpoint	37°
High humidity	82%
Low humidity	28%

**TEXAS**

City	Today	Mon.
Abilene	66/25s	63/20pc
Amarillo	54/30s	53/24s
Austin	75/41s	72/41pc
Beaumont	72/33s	74/40pc
Brownsville	75/33s	78/36pc
Bryan/Collingsworth	73/48s	72/43pc
Corpus Christi	75/33s	75/33s
Dallas/Ft. Worth	69/37s	67/36pc
El Paso	61/34s	59/27s
Galveston	70/60s	71/54pc
King's Bay	77/50s	78/53pc
Lubbock	78/49s	77/49pc
Longview	70/44s	68/37pc
Lubbock	60/31s	57/25s
McAllen	77/54s	78/56pc
Midland/Odessa	66/34s	63/29s
San Angelo	73/30s	69/29pc
San Antonio	74/44s	72/44pc
Texasoma	68/43s	67/37pc
Victoria	75/31s	75/30pc
Waco	75/31s	68/30pc

**NATIONAL cont.**

City	Today	Mon.
Cleveland	39/34sf	42/28pc
Columbus	41/29pc	42/28s
Denver	45/29pc	42/24s
Des Moines	45/25s	43/27c
Detroit	38/30c	41/27pc
Duluth	31/21sn	28/21c
Fort Wayne	26/-31pc	28/-35s
Great Falls	39/29c	37/25pc
Hartford	37/25pc	42/28pc
Honolulu	81/72c	82/72pc
Indianapolis	49/21s	46/28pc
Jackson, MS	50/40pc	50/40pc
Juneau	23/17sn	30/21sn
Kansas City	51/25s	48/28pc
Las Vegas	63/44s	63/44s
Little Rock	62/36s	53/36pc
Los Angeles	70/50s	74/51s
Memphis	59/29s	57/30pc
Miami	79/52s	74/51s
Minneapolis	42/27pc	42/28pc
Missouri	36/21pc	34/21c
Nashville	55/25s	53/24s
New Orleans	64/48s	71/55s
New York City	41/35pc	40/33pc
Oklahoma City	56/27s	52/28s
Ottawa	61/47s	61/47s
Philadelphia	44/34pc	47/29pc
Phoenix	69/44s	69/42s
Pittsburgh	31/30c	40/25pc
Portland, OR	48/43sn	49/40c
Sacramento	58/37pc	58/33s
St. Louis	54/27s	47/30s
San Diego	36/28sn	40/23pc
San Francisco	65/46s	73/46s
San Jose	47/20s	40/16s
Seattle	46/43sn	45/41s
Tucson	73/39s	68/40s
Washington, DC	47/35s	53/30s

**KEY TO CONDITIONS**

s-sunny	f-snow flurries
pc-partly cloudy	sn-snow
c-cloudy	sz-snow
sh-showers	bc-brain
h-hurricanes	

**COASTAL FORECAST**

**GALVESTON BAY:** Wind from the south-southwest at 6-12 knots today. Seas 2 feet or less. Visibility generally unrestricted. **Tonight:** Wind from the south-southwest at 6-12 knots. Seas 2 feet or less. Partly cloudy.

**MATAGORDA SHIP CHANNEL TO MILES ISLAND OUTLET 20 TO 50 Miles:** Wind from the south-southwest at 6-12 knots today. Seas 2 feet or less. Visibility generally unrestricted. **Tonight:** Wind from the south-southwest at 6-12 knots. Seas 2 feet or less. Partly cloudy.

**GALVESTON TIDES**

Highs	Feet	Lows	Feet
2:31 p.m.	0.8	6:42 a.m.	-0.1
11:05 p.m.	0.8	7:32 p.m.	0.7

**RIVERS, CREEKS AND BAYOUS**

Location	Flow	Level	Rate	Stage	Dir.
Bayou Bridge	54	36.1	-0.1		
Brazos River	Byran	43	8.1	-0.5	
	Hempstead	50	10.9	+0.7	
	Richmond	46	9.8	+0.1	
Brazos Bayou	Priney Point	57	25.9	+0.8	
Shreveport	Dr.	73	1.8	+0.6	
Clear Creek	Phonotow	27	1.6	-0.8	
Colorado R.	Austin	20	1.5	-0.7	
	Brazos	25	2.6	-0.8	
	La Grange	32	2.94	+0.2	
	Columbus	34	2.94	+0.2	
	Wharton	39	3.62	+0.2	
	Bay City	44	3.5	+0.4	
Green Bayou	Exxon Park	81	39.1	-0.3	
Heart	Heart	12	7.8	+0.1	
Goat Lake R.	Combit	26	3.4	-0.1	
	Spring Branch	36	2.4	none	
	New Braunfels	33	3.63	none	
	Conzas	31	12.7	+0.3	
	Cuero	20	6.2	+0.2	
	Victoria	21	6.2	+0.6	
	Dupont	20	10.7	-0.5	
Little River	Little River	30	1.5	none	
	Carmon	30	2.2	+0.3	
Neches R.	Enoch	37	1.9	+0.7	
Neches River	Enoch	37	1.9	+0.7	
Pineland R.	South Lake	25	70.2	+2.8	
Saline River	Don Wye	30	16.4	-1.4	
	Deweyville	24	20.9	-0.6	
	Orange	4	1.6	-0.1	
	Burienville	43	11.3	+0.1	
San Bernard R.	Bertrand	19	6.5	none	
E. San Jac. R.	Cleveland	19	5.0	+0.8	
W. San Jac. R.	Conroe	18	9.2	+0.6	
San Jacinto R.	Shedden	30	1.4	-0.3	
San Jacinto R.	Shedden	30	1.4	-0.3	
Sims Bayou	Redwood	30	1.7	-0.7	
Timber Creek	Goodrich	35	7.2	+0.5	
	Liberty	26	8.8	+0.9	
White Creek	Kozaire	20	7.9	+0.2	
White Oak R.	Hedgesville	48	7.9	-0.3	

**TEXAS LAKES**

Lake	Inlet	Level	Inflow
Canyon Dam	909	905.89	ft
Conroe	201	198.78	ft
Houston	4173	4119	ft
Lake Tawakoni	681	670.46	ft
Livingston	81	131.30	ft

**Drones flying over rural areas investigated**

By Brittany Shammus  
 WASHINGTON POST

The drones appear after dark, flying in formation over swaths of land in rural Colorado and Nebraska. For weeks, they have dominated headlines in local newspapers, fueled intense speculation on social media and unsettled residents, who have flooded law enforcement with calls.

So far, the aircraft remain a mystery. Officials in multiple counties say they have not been able to determine who is flying them or why. The Federal Aviation Administration is now investigating, an agency spokesman said.

In the absence of information, wild theories abound in the small communities where the drones

Todd Combs of Yuma County, Colorado, wrote in a Facebook post. "I think we are all feeling a little bit vulnerable due to the intrusion of our privacy that we enjoy in our rural community, but I don't have a solution or know of one right now."

The drones, described by the Denver Post as having six-foot wingspans and numbering at least 17, showed up in mid-December in northeastern Colorado. They emerge nightly around 7 p.m., flying in squares of about 25 miles and staying about 200 feet in the air, the newspaper reported. By about 10 p.m., they're gone.

Local authorities say the mysterious visitors do not appear to be malicious and may not be breaking any laws. Combs noted in his



New York Times file photo  
 Sheriff's departments in western Nebraska and Colorado have received reports of drones flying over towns and fields.

key Harms, told Denver's 9 News she is organizing a team of "drone watchers" to monitor the activity. She hopes that mapping the drone appearances might help answer the question of what they're doing and where they might turn up next.

Groups devoted to tracking the drones have also popped up on Facebook.

"When you put on the landscape blinking lights and fleets of things doing patterns over my fields, that doesn't make me comfortable at all," said Harms, who lives in an area so remote she can hear trucks miles away. "It's curious that no one seems to know why or who or what."

The FAA is considering a rule requiring most drones to be iden-

tracked for 15 miles, hitting