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Hundreds of thousands of active oil and gas wells go without government inspection in any given year, and fines for regulatory violations are too small to change drilling company behavior, according to an energy watchdog group's review of regulation and enforcement activities in six states.

The 124-page report, released Tuesday by the Oil & Gas Accountability Project at Earthworks, an environmental and public health advocacy group based in Washington, examined well inspection data, violations, enforcement actions and penalties in Colorado, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas.

The analysis suggested that state regulators are often understaffed, underfunded, or otherwise unable to keep pace with rapidly expanding oil and gas exploration and the attending risk of spills, leaks, contamination and accidents that might arise through negligence or deliberate shortcutting. The review lands amid a contentious presidential election that has been animated in part by starkly different views on energy development and the appropriate role of the federal government in ensuring that public health and the environment are protected from industrial activity.

"I was surprised at how uniformly inadequate things were," said Bruce Baizel, a staff attorney with Earthworks. "If you compare this to building a house -- you have to have multiple inspections during the home-building process. Why is that not the case here, with oil and gas drilling? It should be. But you can get a permit to drill a well and never see a single inspection. The regulators don't like for that to happen, but it does happen."

Oil and gas industry representatives, as well as state regulators, quickly dismissed the report as both flawed and biased.

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