



In early August 2013, Arlene Skurupey of Blacksburg, Va., got an animated call from the normally taciturn farmer who rents her family land in Billings County, N.D. There had been an accident at the Skurupey 1-9H oil well. “Oh, my gosh, the gold is blowing,” she said he told her. “Bakken gold.”

It was the 11th blowout since 2006 at a North Dakota well operated by Continental Resources, the most prolific producer in the booming Bakken oil patch. Spewing some 173,250 gallons of potential pollutants, the eruption, undisclosed at the time, was serious enough to bring the Oklahoma-based company’s chairman and chief executive, Harold G. Hamm, to the remote scene.

It was not the first or most catastrophic blowout visited by Mr. Hamm, a sharecropper’s son who became the wealthiest oilman in America and energy adviser to Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential campaign. Two years earlier, a towering derrick in Golden Valley County had erupted into flames and toppled, leaving three workers badly burned. “I was a human torch,” said the driller, Andrew J. Rohr.

Blowouts represent the riskiest failure in the oil business. Yet, despite these serious injuries and some 115,000 gallons spilled in those first 10 blowouts, the North Dakota Industrial Commission, which regulates the drilling and production of oil and gas, did not penalize Continental until the 11th.

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