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FEATURED

'Remarkable': Oil and gas sites in NM first ever to get DarkSky certification

By Megan Gleason / Assistant Business Editor

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The night sky, as viewed from southern New Mexico.

Courtesy of David Thornburg



It's one of the brightest spots in North America. But now you can see the Milky Way from it in certain areas.

The Permian Basin, one of the largest oil exploration spots in the U.S. and even the world, is a hotspot for light pollution due to illuminated drilling sites. Despite that, three areas in the basin are newly DarkSky certified, a mark of reducing light pollution and having responsible lighting practices.

The locations, all Franklin Mountain Energy sites in Lea County, are the first oil and gas sites in the world to receive the distinction, according to the Dark for the Park Alliance. It's a pilot project that DarkSky International, the organization responsible for the certifications, hopes other oil and gas companies emulate.

"It's a first, and that's why it's remarkable," Ruskin Hartley, CEO of DarkSky International, told the Journal.

Two of the Franklin Mountain Energy sites are DarkSky retrofit sites, while the other was recognized as a DarkSky new build. The efforts resulted in a 60% reduction in lighting energy consumption and a 99% reduction in light scattering in the night sky, according to the alliance composed of different New Mexico agencies, state parks and organizations.

Dark for the Park Alliance members

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The Dark for the Park Alliance works to restore and maintain night sky quality in the Permian and San Juan Basins in New Mexico, prime oil and gas exploration areas.

Members of the Dark for the Park Alliance include:

Carlsbad Caverns National Park

Chaco Culture National Heritage Park

New Mexico Oil and Gas Association

Bureau of Land Management

New Mexico State Land Office

McDonald Observatory

Apache Point Observatory

DarkSky International

DarkSky New Mexico

The goal at the Franklin Mountain Energy sites was to redirect light downward onto the work surface as opposed to upward into the sky.

The Denver-based energy company was small enough that it could “make changes quickly without needing to go through multiple levels of red tape” and had the assets to get it done, said Rachael Overbey, director of operations

planning and regulatory at Franklin Mountain Energy.

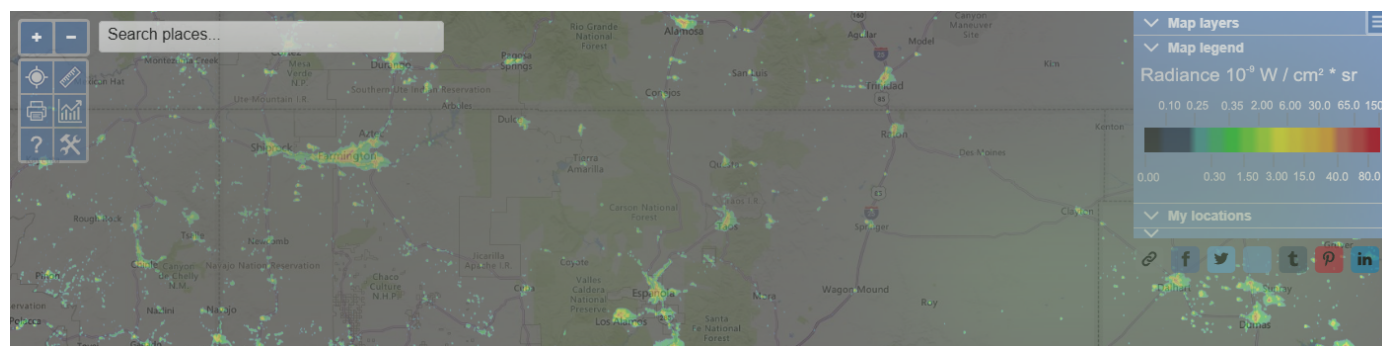
“We were really proud of those three sites and the work that we were able to get done over a six-month period to make it compliant,” she told the Journal.

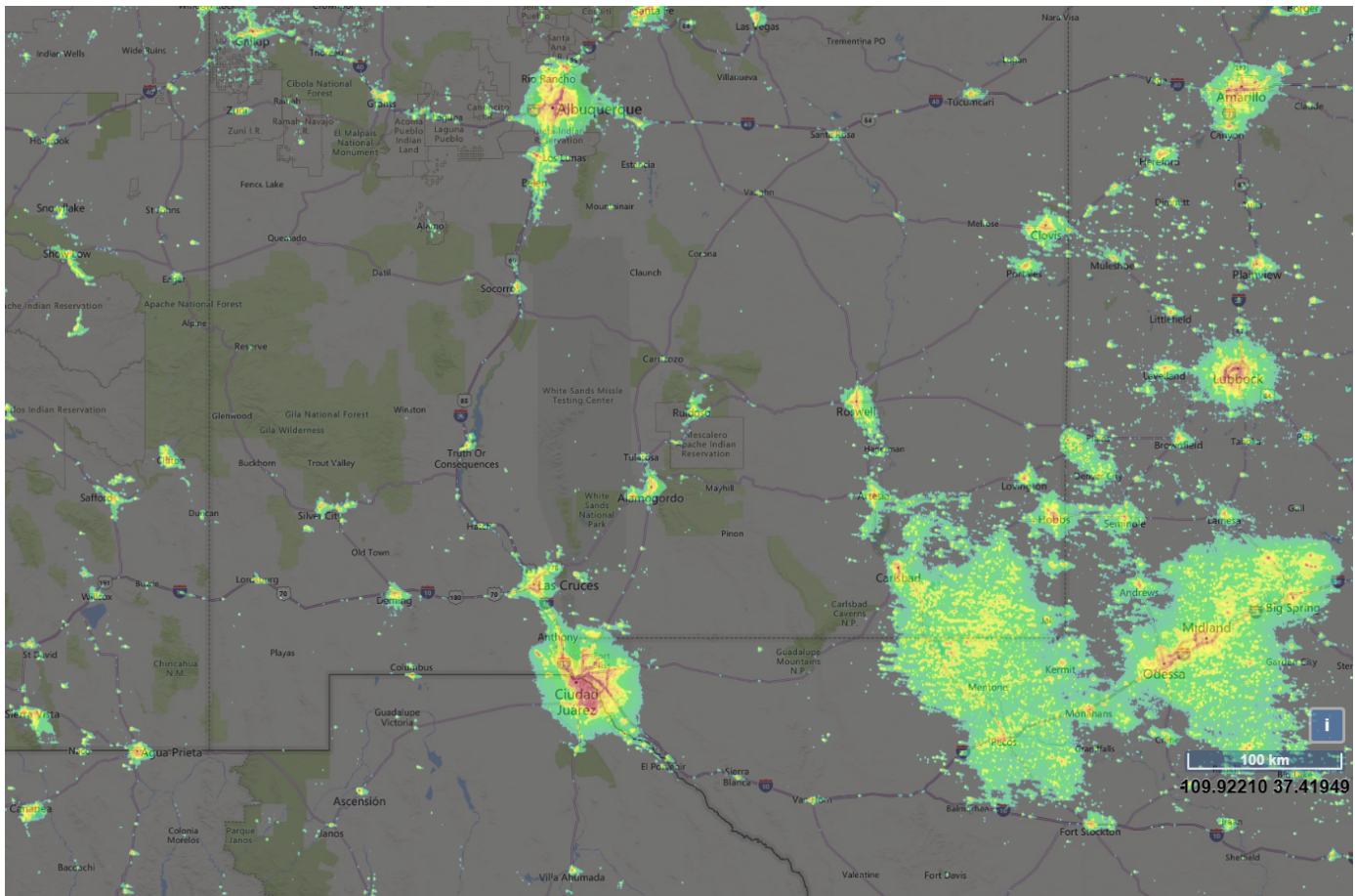
Franklin Mountain Energy is under contract for sale with Texas-based Coterra Energy, and Overbey said she’s hopeful the future leadership will continue on in the work.

“Even here in Denver, where I live, I drive around and I can see these exact same lighting issues presenting themselves, and the fixes really aren’t that complicated. So if it benefits the surrounding community, it’s so worth it,” Overbey added.

The energy company in recent years has been tagged for emissions, and venting and flaring violations. In 2024, Franklin Mountain Energy was one of eight companies found to have only a 40% emissions compliance rate by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the New Mexico Environment Department. And in 2023, the state’s Oil Conservation Division noticed a violation to Franklin Mountain Energy for flaring or venting, which contributes to air pollution.

Light pollution in the U.S. increased by 28% from 2020 to 2023, according to the National Parks Service.





A screenshot of a map showing light pollution in New Mexico. The Permian Basin in the southwest is a night light polluter.

National Parks Service

The New Mexico Oil and Gas Association is committed to partnerships like the DarkSky initiative “that maintain and enhance our state’s natural beauty while meeting and exceeding the most robust safety and security standards,” said Missi Currier, president and CEO of NMOGA. She said her organization looks forward to future collaborative opportunities.

The bats living at Carlsbad Caverns National Park are what spurred the pollution mitigation work with Franklin Mountain Energy. Hartley said the lights in the area were causing issues for the bats since the animals are sensitive to lights, so DarkSky sought nearby sites to lessen light pollution.

Hartley explained that the reason the Permian Basin is such a bright spot is

because of all of the lights being used at oil and gas facilities, often running 24/7, not flaring like some people assume.

The work to minimize light pollution in southwestern New Mexico also raised broader concerns from communities living in rural America who “don’t want the bright lights in New York and Las Vegas,” he said.

This kind of work is a win-win, he said, and is good for people, animals, the environment and the economy.

“Quality lighting doesn’t mean turning off all the lights. It just means being thoughtful about it,” Hartley said.

Anyone designing a facility can take guidance from DarkSky International on which lights to purchase and how to install them. Hartley added that the practices come at essentially no additional cost.

The New Mexico Oil and Gas Association also has a lighting guidance document available at www.nmoga.org/dark_sky_lighting_guide with suggestions for how other oil and gas companies can do similar work.

“These are simple solutions, they’re cost effective and they have immediate result,” Hartley said.

Maps showing light pollution levels and more information on how to protect night skies can be found at www.nps.gov/subjects/nightskies/index.htm.

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