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A singular approach to energy

TRISHA CURTIS OF PETRONERDS LOOKS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL AMONG MANY

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When Trisha Curtis, a self-described “petro-nerd,” looks at a pile of frack sand, she sees the individual, tiny grains that are crucial to the record-breaking surge in U.S. oil and gas production during the last decade.

And where many see the U.S. oil and gas sector as a single monolith, Curtis sees myriad companies, engineers, executives and innovators – each making their own decisions that drive themselves, their firm and the industry forward.

It’s that ability to see the individual in the many that Curtis brings as co-founder of PetroNerds LLC, a Denver oil and gas analysis and consulting company she started with partner Ben Montalbano in 2015.

“Many analysts and observers lump all the operators together and speak about [it] as though it functions as one entity,” Curtis said.

But that’s not the situation at all, she says.

The U.S. energy industry – specifically the companies pulling oil and gas out of the shale rock formations, such as those in Colorado’s Denver-Julesburg Basin – is made up of hundreds of individual companies. Each of them have their own collection of wells and mineral rights, their own management styles, and their own opinions about drilling and producing, Curtis said.

“We pay attention to what the operators are doing. The more you understand about the individual operators and their behaviors then the more you can understand what’s happening in the U.S. and the global oil markets,” she said.

That specialty has taken Curtis far from her northwestern Colorado roots, where she grew up outside of Craig, about 40 miles from the Wyoming border with one foot in agriculture and the other in oil and gas.

“Our land outside of Craig connects to my grandfather’s wheat fields,” Curtis said. “We had a ranch outside of Baggs, Wyoming, and my father pumped oil wells in northwest Colorado and throughout Wyoming.”

She spent summers in college building fences, stacking hay, and painting oil wells with her father “from the pump jack to the heater treater to the flow lines.”

Curtis studied at Denver’s Regis University, then



**PetroNerds co-founder
Trisha Curtis relaxes
at home with Axle.**

went on to the London School of Economics for a master’s degree.

“That was eye opening. I thought Denver was big, but London was a lot bigger,” she remembers with a laugh.

While across an ocean, Curtis heard about the beginnings of the Bakken oil field in North Dakota, which in the mid-2000s would start driving U.S. oil production upward, to levels not seen in decades through the use of hydraulic fracturing (which uses sand and water to release oil and gas molecules from the rock) and horizontal drilling.

“My uncle was working up there, then my dad went up there and I was hearing about the beginning, about farmers being made into millionaires. I was fascinated by the new type of drilling and completing operations,” Curtis said.

“I knew I wanted to work in oil. Oil was always at the crux of something bigger, such as things happening in Russia or China or the Middle East.”

At PetroNerds, Curtis says she enjoys diving into the weeds – or the grains of sand.

She’s talked about the U.S. industry at conferences around the world, from London to Saudi Arabia and in Vienna at a forum organized by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). And she’s listened to the geologists and

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petroleum engineers and fracking experts explain their methods.

“I’ve found that no one agrees on the best way to do this. In talking to engineers, completion [fracking] experts, the individual operators – they really don’t know that much. They frack the rock and put the sand downhole, but they don’t know why it’s working,” she said.

“And that’s exciting to me. If we’re this successful and don’t really know what it is that we’re doing, then imagine what we could do if we knew.”

