

# Bentonite producers hit by natural gas shortage

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CHEYENNE — Because of the natural gas shortages, Wyoming bentonite producers are exploring an alternate fuel source.

The topic was on the agenda for the annual meeting of bentonite producers who were attending the Wyoming Association convention here Wednesday at the Hitching Post Inn.

Fred Clark, president of Benton Clay Co. of Casper, said bentonite plants in the northern part of the Black Hills have been forced to curtail production because they cannot obtain an adequate natural gas supply.

The industry uses natural gas in the drying process. Clark said in its raw form, the material contains 25 to 30 per cent moisture which must be reduced to about six per cent.

The trona industry in southwestern Wyoming was forced to turn to coal for its fuel source because of the natural gas shortages. Clark indicated the bentonite industry also may have to look to coal.

The operators also discussed the new severance tax assessments. The 1975 legislature raised the mineral severance

tax on bentonite from one to two per cent.

"It's more than we like to pay," said Clark, who pointed out that, as always, the consumer will ultimately bear the cost.

He said bentonite production in Wyoming is fairly stable. Although there is increased demand for drilling mud by the oil industry, this is offset by a downturn in industrial needs for molding clay which Clark attributed to the general economic slowdown.

A recurring problem for the producers, he explained, is the failure of the federal Bureau of Land Management to issue patents on bentonite mining claims on federal lands. He said this topic comes up at each annual meeting.

While the bentonite producers discussed mutual issues, most of the other miners were out on the golf course for the Wyoming Mining Association's tournament Wednesday afternoon.

A business session was scheduled for Wednesday evening.

The convention, which runs through Saturday, will get in full swing Friday with a full program. Association executive secretary Bill Budd said more than 1,000 members are expected to attend the annual session.

## Natural Gas Shortage Affects Bentonite Refining

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Thu, Apr 30, 2020