In recent years it’s been virtually impossible for Coloradans to miss advertisements on the television, radio, and in newspapers touting the oil and gas industry’s commitment to safety and environmental responsibility. One company in particular, Anadarko Petroleum, has led the charge to frame the oil and gas industry as a good neighbor while defeating proposed safety measures. A review of Anadarko’s recent spending sheds light on how the oil and gas giant spent heavily on advertising, lobbying, and political races, while shirking inspections and safety checks on old wells, like the one linked to a fatal home explosion in Firestone, Colorado.

**BUYING A SOCIAL LICENSE TO DRILL**

In 2013, as tensions mounted amid a dramatic increase in drilling across Colorado, Anadarko Petroleum and Noble Energy created Coloradans for Responsible Energy Development, better known as CRED. The organization’s stated mission is “to educate the public on safe, environmentally responsible energy development practices of the oil and natural gas industry in Colorado.” In practice, the group was designed to be a public relations firm for the industry, beating back bills and ballot measures aimed at increasing safeguards on drilling practices.

For the first four years of CRED’s existence, the only years for which tax records are available, the group received more than $38 million in funding, primarily from Anadarko and Noble. Virtually all of that money went to an Oregon consulting firm, PAC/WEST, which designs their ads and runs the organization.
CRED has run millions in advertisements on television, touting the **benefits of fracking**, the **industry’s safety record**, and testimonials from **politicians** and **industry employees** about oil and gas development going hand in hand with clean air and water. They have sponsored sections in **local newspapers**, and broadcasts on radio stations. PAC/WEST has **even bragged** that they “created ads tailored to Denver Broncos football fans and used geo-fencing technology to ensure that every cell phone at the game received the ad.”

In recent interviews, Anadarko’s former head of government relations in Colorado and a co-creator of CRED, Chris Castilian, has pulled back the curtain on why the industry invested so heavily in the group.

“[Anadarko] spent a lot of time and energy and money and reputations of people like me **purchasing a social license to operate in Colorado**. That social license helped us to beat ballot measures, defeat issues in the legislature, win support from people and communities throughout Colorado.”

— **CHRIS CASTILIAN, COLORADO INDEPENDENT**

Put another way, those millions spent on advertisements were intended for one purpose: to persuade Coloradans to believe that the oil and gas industry is a good neighbor that can be trusted to safely drill near communities.
SHIRKING SAFETY MEASURES

Anadarko has consistently justified its opposition to proposed safety regulations by claiming to have an already robust safety program. However, a whistleblower lawsuit paints a different picture. In it, former Anadarko employees depict a company prioritizing profits above safety.

The lack of adequate precautions came into sharp focus on April 27, 2017, when a home in Firestone, Colorado exploded, killing two people. The explosion was caused by buildup of odorless natural gas that came from an uncapped line flowing from an Anadarko-owned natural gas well just 170 feet from the house, which ignited when the homeowner tried to start the pilot light on his hot water heater.

The well was one of 1,500 aging Noble Energy wells obtained by Anadarko in a 2013 Weld County land swap. According to whistleblowers, Anadarko performed inspections on only “a tiny proportion” of wells acquired from Noble Energy. According to one former employee, Anadarko assigned only one inspector to all of the wells in the massive oil and gas field surrounding Firestone, a job that should have taken 12 to 20 inspectors. Further, the lawsuit alleges that Anadarko, on at least 2,400 occasions, did not follow rules requiring oil and gas companies to seal off abandoned flow lines.

Safety problems worsened in 2014 when Anadarko slashed its well remediation budget, and again in 2016 when, despite laying off 20 percent of its workforce, Anadarko ramped up oil and gas production.

The lack of emphasis on safety seems systemic, with former employees alleging that even though the company was aware of safety risks associated with certain wells, a “well’s potential safety risks, and whether it was located in a residential area or near a school, played no part in whether it was chosen for remediation.”
ANADARKO SPENDS FREELY ON POLITICAL RACES

Anadarko’s lavish spending has not been constrained to public relations, the company has also invested heavily in Colorado political races—beating back ballot measures, backing candidates, and funding committees designed to elect pro-drilling majorities in the state legislature.

Since 2013, Anadarko has given more than $13.5 million to political committees created to defeat ballot measures that would limit drilling and support initiatives that would make it more difficult to pass similar ballot initiatives in the future.

Already in 2018, Anadarko has given nearly $2.5 million to defeat a potential ballot initiative aimed at increasing the distance required between new wells and existing buildings. The company has also donated to the state’s Senate Majority Fund, which received $25,000 from Anadarko for the purpose of electing a Republican majority in the state legislature. Those contributions make Anadarko the second largest donor in Colorado this year, behind only Jared Polis, the multi-millionaire candidate for governor who has pumped $10.5 million into his own campaign.

LOBBYING AT THE STATEHOUSE

Anadarko’s influence extends beyond election season, it routinely looks to cash in at the Colorado statehouse by defeating new drilling safeguards. Since 2010, Anadarko has hired a prominent lobbying shop, Brandeberry McKenna Public Affairs, to represent its interests in the Colorado state legislature.

Within the last two years, Anadarko has opposed bills that would require state officials to regulate oil and gas development in a manner consistent with public health and safety, increase the distance between new wells and school property, and disclose the locations of flow lines, such as the one which exploded in Firestone.
BACK TO THE AIRWAVES

As Coloradans prepare to head to the polls this fall, Anadarko and its public relations machine are once again ramping up to defeat oil and gas ballot measures and elect pro-drilling legislators. Instead of spending millions on advertisements touting its commitment to safety, perhaps Anadarko should put its money where its mouth is and put Colorado first by conducting more well inspections, boosting worker safety, and working with regulators on effective public health safeguards.

And as Coloradans see the flood of ads from CRED and Anadarko, they should heed Castillian’s assessment of his former employer: “Now they don’t have the standing to say we deserve that social license,” he said. “That bank account is largely dry.”