DENVER A few years ago, the foreman of a gravel mine seeking to expand despite neighbors' wishes said something that's been rattling around my head recently. The good Lord, he said, put gravel only in certain places, and you can't get it by digging where it ain't.

I've spent the past six months driving around Utah, Kansas, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico, and I'm very much appreciating the $3 gas we're pumping. Although my cost of gas has dropped significantly, there's another cost most of you aren't seeing, and it's a cost that foreman understood when he talked about mining: You've got to dig where the stuff is.

Across the West, America's push toward energy independence is rekindling long-simmering conflicts over how, where and when oil companies should burrow deep beneath the Earth.

In many small towns, former Alaska governor Sarah Palin's call to "drill here, drill now" reverberates with the diesel engines driving pipe deep underground. You see it on the faces of workers driving new pickups and helping the country reduce its dependence on foreign oil. You see it in the booked-up hotel rooms and billboards seeking oilfield workers known as roustabouts.

The oil boom sounds extra loud in the vast undeveloped West. It's tough for me to watch unwanted natural gas flaring off against the backdrop of Colorado's Never Summer, Mount Zirkel and Rawah wildernesses. It's hard to see drilling rigs boring into Utah's red sandstone near Moab, a few miles from where tourists snap photos of Arches and Canyonlands national parks.

It's yet another thing to drive Highway 50, the Loneliest Road in America, to look at the vast undeveloped and largely unused lands in the middle of our country and wonder if it really is such a big deal to add a few thousand more oil and gas wells.

All that has gotten me wondering whether we're truly calculating the costs of that $3 gas.

Insulated in big cities on the East and West Coasts, many people remain utterly disconnected from the realities of what it takes to keep the lights on, to fuel the planes connecting our globe and SUVs in which we commute. It's easy to attack petroleum extraction when it happens thousands of miles away from you, and your lights stay on no matter how much you criticize.

Moab-based mountain bike outfitter and recreation consultant Ashley Korenblat is part of a Utah coalition trying to balance the vast resources locked beneath public lands against the value those lands have remaining pristine. She echoes what that gravel mine foreman once said: "You've got to pull the resource from where it is," Korenblat said. "You've got to get it from where it is, but the question becomes, do you have to get every drop? Do we need to burn the Picassos to heat the house for an hour?"

What tradeoffs are we prepared to make for that $3 gas? Do we risk losing our pristine lands to save a few bucks on each tank? Are we as a nation prepared to lose those views to help spur our economy, put our neighbors to work and keep costs down? I don't have those answers. Our political landscape has gotten so polarized, it's hard to know if anyone else does.

When your opinion on the Keystone XL pipeline is often a shortcut to understanding where you stand on oil and gas drilling in America, I ask for more nuance, more conversation, more sophistication about the choices we make.