

# Just one question ...

If you could ask a millionaire one question, what would it be? That was the theme of the last day of interviews during the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference in Bismarck this past May.

I should point out that most of my interviews in the past have been long for-



## JASON SPIESS

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mat and centered around soft, relevant news. So up until this year, each one of my interviews has been one-on-one and an average of ten minutes. This press conference “only ask one question” business is really new to me.

I like to call my interviews long format interviews — a dying art in the journalistic and linguistic world. So entering into the realm of hard news press conferences, while attempting to produce layered content, is a bit of a challenge. There are times where a follow-up question is not going to happen. Reporters from the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Associated Press and other major new outlets are in attendance and they are familiar with how to work the angles at a press conference.

And that was the case at the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference. At many of the high profile speaker’s press conferences, there was a one question limit. I am not saying anything disparaging about that, but only pointing out that due to time, the number of media in attendance and schedules, one question was about the only realistic rule that made sense. The other thing I like to point out is that whenever private citizens and media personalities take time to answer questions from the media, one question is pretty darn good. They don’t have to take any questions or agree to show up to a press conference. So I felt pretty fortunate to have this Bakken opportunity.

There I am, sitting in the press room, trying to figure out how to turn several questions into one. And would I even get called on? For Hannity and the three CEO’s it was standing room only in the press room, so the odds were not in my favor.

So what do you ask Sean Hannity? He isn’t an expert in energy. He isn’t an insider on the trends and behaviors of the energy sector. He’s an expert on the media, perhaps, but not energy. Why not ask him a question that correlates with why

he is speaking at the conference? Except I am not big into asking political questions, so I leave that to the radio talk show hosts. In essence, he was at the WBPC to be a cheerleader for American jobs and the economy. Makes sense, considering the energy revolution is blazing a new path of careers and opportunity.

After Hannity enters the room, NDPC president Ron Ness addresses the standing-room-only crowd in the media room and explains that each person called on will be allowed one question due to a very strict schedule. Well, wouldn’t you know it? Hannity selected the reporters, and I was the first person he called on. Ready or not ... well, the question had to be ready.

“Mr. Hannity, I recently returned from Las Vegas where I attended a 70th birthday party with a large variety of ages and occupations. One of the main conversations at the event was the issue of 15,000 kids graduating from high school with no jobs available. High school counselors, parents and family members were encouraging them to go to North Dakota instead of attending college or going into the Army. What are your comments and thoughts about parents, counselors and family members encouraging kids to bypass college or the army for the Bakken?”

“I wouldn’t be the person I am if I didn’t spend years washing dishes, cooking, waiting tables, busing tables, tending bar, painting homes, hanging wallpaper, laying tiles, framing houses, roofing and doing reconstruction,” Hannity said. “You know what, I know what it is like to have \$200 in the bank, for years — this is decades of my life. People think ‘Oh, Hannity you’re a radio and TV guy you must be rich.’ Well, whatever money I have, it came later in life and the best thing I ever did was get my hands dirty and go to work. It leaves such an impression on you. My son wants to go to work and get his hands dirty; I’m all for it. The sad thing is there’s a couple of statistics that came out recently, and with all the talk about the recovery summer and the stimulus and shovel-ready jobs, we have more people graduating college and going home and living with mommy and daddy. Now, I left home when I was 18,

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— Conservative national radio and TV talk show host Sean Hannity

and I don’t want to go back home and live with mommy and daddy, and I don’t think those kids want to either. That’s not why they went to college. Then, there was a story in California, you have 50 to 64-year-olds moving in with their parents. Last thing I want when I am 80 is to have my kid knock on the door and say ‘I’m moving in dad, I’m like ‘No, you’re not, so go get a job.’ Look

you’re all experiencing this, I don’t even know why you guys are still in the media here. You all ought to get out into the oil fields and make more money. My first job in radio paid me \$19,000 a year and I moved to Huntsville, Ala. That’s the other thing, I worked my way up in media. Right from the bottom. For free to \$19,000 a year, \$40,000 a year. I moved to states where I didn’t know a single soul. And then I was very blessed and lucky. I would like to say it is talent, but it’s not.”

When the press conference was over, later that day, I had the opportunity to ask one question of Continental Resources CEO Harold Hamm, Whiting Petroleum CEO Jim Volker and Oasis Petroleum CEO Tommy Nusz. There were some different rules at this event. You got one question for the three speakers. And unless you specified who the question was directed to, it was CEO roulette. So, I got ready with my question and raised my hand.

This time it was Ron Ness pointing and picking amongst the sea of raised hands. Must have been my lucky day. I was chosen to ask the first question.

“My question is about the relationship between agriculture and energy. A merger or coexistence of the two industries appears to be happening. From ethanol to the increase of LNG products and even the rail. If you could comment on that relationship between energy and ag.”

“I’ll take that one,” Harold Hamm said. “First of all, those two are the premiere industries of the state and are very important here and we recognize that. Working with land owners, the ecopad development has been tremendous and the lateral development minimizes sur-

face usage and has worked very well. Ethanol is a deal on its own. A lot of people are wanting to see the mandates go away and probably it’s time to phase that out sometime in the future. In 2007, George Bush put in those mandates, as you are aware. And that was a time before people realized the full resource potential of this country. So, is it time to back up on that and maybe narrow that down? I don’t know. We’ll see what the politicians do.”

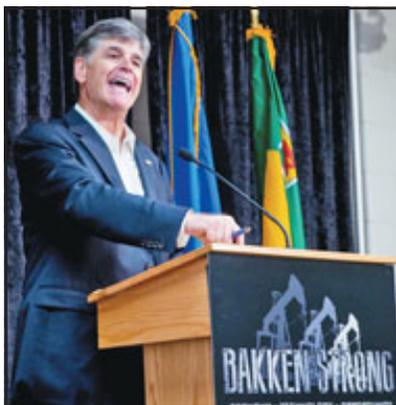
Within a millisecond after Hamm finished his sentence, a reporter from the Wall Street Journal, I believe, chimed in with his question. However, Jim Volker, interrupted the reporter to continue answering my question about the ag and energy relationship.

“I would like to take a shot at that, too,” Volker said as he positioned himself behind the podium. “The relationship with ag and the oil and gas industry is one that goes back to the founding of our industry. That’s why we call our departments that work with the surface owners our land departments. And we honor those relationships because, without them, we don’t have a place to drill. So, it’s very important for us to be good stewards of the land, air and water, as well as the oil and gas resource. All three of us up here believe in that. And we are doing a lot things whether it is the ecopads that Harold has just talked about, or the natural gas processing plants and the pipelines. I said in my talk that Whiting has about \$600 million dollars tied up in the plants and pipelines we put in here to capture that natural gas resource. It is our responsibility to see that it works well for the surface owner, the mineral interest owner, who in this state, fortunately, are many private individuals who are farmers and ranchers. It also has to work well for the state as a whole so we maintain that quality of life. We all want to see that quality of life, if not maintained, improved.”

One thing I learned from this experience is that when you ask only one question of high profile guests at press conferences, you will almost always get more than one answer.

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Jason Spiess is a multi-media journalist and host of Building the Bakken Radio. Building the Bakken Radio can be heard in Bismarck on SuperTalk KLXX 1270AM on Sundays at 10am CT. To see if your listening area carries the radio program or see the entire Building the Bakken Media Network, visit [www.buildingthebakken.com](http://www.buildingthebakken.com). Spiess can be contacted at [jason@buildingthebakken.com](mailto:jason@buildingthebakken.com).



By PAUL FLESSLAND/For the Tribune  
Conservative national radio and TV talk show host Sean Hannity provided the keynote address for the final day of the 22nd Williston Basin Petroleum Conference at the Bismarck Civic Center on May 22.