



## Heartbreaking Stories Warn New Yorkers of What May Be in Store if the State OKs Controversial Gas Drilling

By Maura Stephens, AlterNet

Posted on December 10, 2009, Printed on February 16, 2011

<http://www.alternet.org/story/144498/>

I live and work in Marcellus shale ground zero -- central New York State, just south of the Finger Lakes, one of the biggest and best watersheds in the hemisphere. My home is in economically challenged, mostly rural Tioga County, and I work in Tompkins County. Almost all our neighbors for several miles around have signed gas leases. I participate regularly and actively as a client, colleague, patient, or volunteer with businesses, organizations, and institutions in 19 other New York counties.

I have been economically poor and landless, economically comfortable and landless, comfortable and landed, and poor and landed. I've been rural, suburban, and urban. And I've spent most of my adult life paying state and local taxes in New York State (and a whole lot of national taxes, most of which have gone toward things I do not condone). I am a farmer, writer, editor, actor, and educator. My spouse, who was laid off a couple years ago and has been underemployed and looking for work ever since, and I struggle to make ends meet. Yet we love this part of the world and have been glad to call it home. This is all by way of showing we are stakeholders in this region, dubbed "Marcellus shale" for the natural gas reserves hidden underground. Because we care a whole lot and wanted to learn firsthand, my spouse and I recently traveled around West Virginia and Pennsylvania, talking to people whose lives have been affected by the same sort of hydrofracturing (or "fracking"), a technique used in drilling for natural gas that is likely to soon take place in New York State.

Most of these Pennsylvanians told us they rue the day they signed the gas leases. Some of them "inherited" gas leases -- or bought property on which there was a mineral rights lease they were unaware of -- and now are paying the consequences.

Their stories were heartbreaking. This is some of what they told us, including several things not mentioned in other articles I've read about fracking:

**1) There is no longer any privacy on their own property.** Posted signs are a thing of the past; there's no way to guarantee that anyone would pay attention to them. The gas drillers have access to leased land 24/7, 365 days a year, because there is always something to deal with on a gas pad. The land owners no longer

have privacy or the ability to walk at will on their own property. One woman told us she and her teenage daughter feel like prisoners in their home. They used to walk around in bathing suits or pajamas in the privacy of their 100-plus-acre farm. That's no longer an option -- they stay inside with the blinds drawn even on nice days because they never know when and where a stranger will be walking around the property.

**2) The gas companies can pretty much do as they please.** There is no consultation with the landowners about placement or size of the pads, or the numerous roads that have to be cut into the property, or drainage fields, or pond sites, or planned building sites. One farmer, who had dreamed of this since his elder son's birth in 1983, gave his son and new daughter-in-law three acres on which to build a house, on a lovely corner of his farm. The newlyweds were just about to begin building the home they'd designed when the gas company decided to drill on the very same spot. The family had no way of fighting the gas company, which refused to change its drilling location. The young man and his bride were forced to rent an apartment in town. Subsequently the drilling contaminated the well that provided drinking water to the family and farm animals. And although the site did not yield gas, the land is no longer usable for farming or placing a home. The farmer, incidentally, had bought the land in the early 1980s without realizing a gas company held mineral rights to it via a 1920s lien.

**3) The gas companies do not respect the land.** The gas companies have in numerous documented cases torn out mature stands of trees -- 20, 30, 60, 80 years old -- leaving the tree carcasses scattered about the land. "These guys just don't care," one landowner told us, close to tears. "They treated my farm like a garbage dump. They moved their bowels in the woods and left their filthy toilet paper behind. They threw all their rubbish around -- plastic bottles, McDonald's bags, you name it. I used to always kept this place manicured. It's been my pride and joy. But now, it's a rubbish heap. I'm still finding junk they left around, long after the fracking ended."

**4) There's light and noise nonstop.** "No amount of money can buy you sufficient sleep," said a farmer. "It's bright and loud, all the time. Not that I'd sleep anyway. All I do is worry about the land and the water and what we are going to do."

**5) Their property has lost its value.** "We can't drink our water," said the same farmer. "We can't reclaim the land. They're putting my farm out of business. The land is worthless. Nobody would want it, like this."

**6) They can no longer fish in their streams and ponds.** So many of these waterways have been poisoned by fracking waste, runoff, spillage, or dumping, that fishers are afraid to eat the fish they catch. One farmer, who told us he'd planned to stock his farm pond with seven varieties of fish that he would raise and sell to other landowners, has lost this income stream because his pond was polluted by fracking.

**7) The water is dangerously unsafe.** "A primary reason we chose to live in this area," says a woman from central New York, "is that it has abundant clean water."

The western half or two-thirds of the United States, and the Southeast -- the entire rest of the country -- has precious little water. But we have always had plenty of fresh, safe, available water. Now we are threatened with gas fracturing, or 'fracking.' The contaminants released in the fracking process are carcinogenic (cancer-inducing) and even radioactive. Everyone around here depends on our wells for safe drinking water. Now how can we ever drink our water again? City water is no safer."

The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) identified at least 14 different petroleum distillates used or proposed for use in New York fracking. Research done by the nonprofit Environmental Working Group, which monitors the safety of public health and the environment, demonstrates that petroleum distillates can contain benzene, a known carcinogen, as well as toluene, ethylbenzene, xylene, and other dangerous chemicals. The EPA says that all of these substances are toxic in water at very low levels.

An article in the *Ithaca Journal* said that, "Radioactive waste from the Marcellus is an issue state regulators will have to anticipate as they draft new rules for tapping the massive natural gas field under the Southern Tier. An analysis of wastewater samples by the Department of Health found levels of radium-226, and related alpha and beta radiation that are up to 10,000 times higher than drinking water standards, according to a memo the agency sent to the Department of Environmental Conservation."

We've spoken to farmers who had their drinking water analyzed and found some of these toxic chemicals in it. No wonder they will not drink the water from their own wells, or allow their children to do so. The levels of benzene, a petroleum distillate, to be used in hydrofracking in New York, per the DEC's draft supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement (dsGEIS), range from 140,000 times the levels deemed "safe" by the EPA to 18.6 million times the safe level. Thus, as Environmental Working Group points out, "if 800 gallons of petroleum distillate were to contaminate a water supply, "depending on the benzene concentration, it would likely take somewhere between 112 million gallons (800 X 140,000) and 14.9 billion gallons (800 X 18.6 million) of water to dilute the benzene to EPA's safe level. If 6,400 gallons of petroleum distillate were to contaminate a water supply, it would likely take somewhere between 896 million and 119 billion gallons of water to dilute the benzene to EPA's safe levels." Where would all this water come from? And where would the contaminated billions of gallons of water be disposed? There simply is no good answer to either question.

**8) There is no transparency by the gas corporations.** In 2006 Republican-led Congress removed hydraulic fracturing from any regulation under the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, and since 1980 many thousands of wells have been exempted from the Clean Air Act, which limits emissions of more than 180 toxic pollutants, many of which are emitted by gas companies. The gas companies managed in 1988 to get exemptions from the 1976 Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), which established a cradle-to-grave hazardous waste management program, as well. Last spring, with a new Congress, the energy

industry launched a concerted lobbying effort to fight proposed tightening of federal oversight, claiming that any changes in the exemptions would mean loss of jobs and lower tax revenues.

There are other laws from which gas companies are largely exempt: The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), which holds most other industries accountable for cleaning up hazardous waste (this is the law that created the so-called "Superfund" to be used to clean up contaminated sites; the fund was initially financed via taxes on the chemical and petroleum industries, but Congress abandoned those taxes and now pays for these cleanups out of general funds. Thus the fund is too small to meet cleanup needs. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 1969), which shifts to the public the burden of proof that activities by certain oil and gas drilling companies are unsafe.

Out West, a doctor trying to save the life of a nurse who'd come in contact with the clothing of a gas-fracking worker tried to get a list of the chemicals so he'd be able to pinpoint what had made her ill. The company that made the fluid refused to identify it, citing trade secrets. Even in the face of imminent death to someone contaminated by their chemical witches' brew, the gas corporations show their true colors: The bottom line is all that matters. Our health and the health of our families come in a distant second, and our environment -- our air, water, soil, and surroundings -- do not matter in the least. Why do gas companies (a) refuse to divulge the chemical contents of their materials and (b) fight to gain and keep exemptions from health- and environmental-protection bills?

In the last couple of months, around Dimock, Pennsylvania, Cabot Oil and Gas, one of the fracking companies, has caused numerous spills and contamination of water wells and waterways. A court ordered Cabot to pay several fines for these transgressions. But the fines amount to just a couple hundred thousand dollars -- pennies to a corporation that stands to gain billions from its fracking operations. Fifteen brave Dimock families are suing Cabot for ruining their water and posing a threat to their health.)

**9.) The tension between neighbors** -- those who have signed a lease and are sticking with it and those who have either signed and regretted it or never signed -- is ugly. One landowner, the only one in a long row along a rural road in Tioga County, New York, has been threatened and shunned by neighbors because his holding out caused the gas companies to build their pipeline around his and neighbors' land. This meant the neighbors could not collect any royalty fees from the gas companies -- the incentive that, despite the dangers, excites so many lease signers.

**10) The tension within families** is palpable as well. "My whole family is ready to commit me," a Pennsylvania man, the father of two young children, told us. "It's gotten so I don't trust anyone anymore. These gas companies lie, the DEP lies, the state lies, everyone lies. I used to be a trusting kind of person. Not anymore. And I'm so tense, I never sleep. This place was our dream, and now it's just about

worthless. It's eating me up, and my wife is losing patience with me. I don't blame her. All I can do is fight to make sure this doesn't happen to other families. Otherwise I couldn't live with myself." On so many fronts, this practice of hydrofracking is simply too dangerous to pursue. We can live without the natural gas.

Contrary to corporate spin (even progressive radio host Stephanie Miller has been touting it), natural gas is not a clean alternative to coal and oil. It is also neither renewable nor sustainable. The reserves in the Marcellus shale will last only a few years at best, but the damage done to the environment and to our health will last for decades, even generations. Extracting it is just too dangerous. So let's do something else. We've got to pump up our activism on this front. We cannot allow gas and oil companies to dictate that we drink poison and allow our homes, property, landscapes, and health to be ruined. Let's get those gas companies and all their thousands of employees to focus their energy and resources on finding a truly sustainable, truly clean energy source, and developing affordable ways to bring it to millions.

Many of us are already committed to eliminating the overuse of energy in our daily lives and in our workplaces. Together we can create a sustainable energy infrastructure based on renewable, truly clean energy sources -- solar, wind, geothermal, and possibly biofuels. Together we can keep our water, farms, forests, fields, vineyards, streams, waterfalls, lakes, creeks, ponds, soil, rolling hills, small towns, quaint villages, and precious way of life safe and unspoiled so that our children, their children, and future generations will be able to breathe the air and drink the water without fear. We've made a lot of mistakes, for which our children and grandchildren and future generations will be paying the price. They deserve a better world, not a depleted, ugly, frightening one. Please, please, let's not screw this up, too.

Join thousands of other individuals, elected officials, entrepreneurs, institutions, and organizations in signing a [coalition letter](#) to New York Governor David Paterson asking him to ban hydrofracturing gas drilling in New York State. Hurry - - the deadline for public comment on the Department of Environmental Conservation's draft supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement is December 31, 2009.

*Writer Maura Stephens lives in the hills outside Spencer, New York. She wrote this using voice recognition software.*

© 2011 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.  
View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/144498/>

[w1]