



Hidden in the Hollows: My Frack-Finding Weekend in West Virginia

By ©Chris Bolgiano www.chrisbolgiano.com bolgiace@jmu.edu
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Above: Diane Pitcock, organizer of WV Host Farms, explains a drilling site to our group. Middle: Pitcock looks out from her porch to adjoining land where a rig is drilling for shale gas, top.



A shiny new gas drill rises like a monument to risk-taking in the view from Diane Pitcock's front porch. "Here in Doddridge County, West Virginia," she said above a low rumble like a perpetually busy superhighway, "we're in the heart of the Marcellus shale gas formation. But no one had heard of that when we retired here from Baltimore seven years ago."

Since 2005, when Congress gave shale gas developers the "Halliburton exemption" from federal environmental laws, a new form of drilling called "fracking" has exploded, sometimes literally. Fracking means drilling thousands of feet vertically and then horizontally, then pumping water mixed with sand and toxic chemicals down to crack the shale layers and release gas.

Thousands of wells have been fracked in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio, and thousands more are proposed there and in adjoining states. State regulations and enforcement tend to be patchy.

"Gas companies know they can do anything they want," Pitcock said, "especially where people are poor and poorly educated."

Pitcock happens to have a Masters in Education from Johns Hopkins University. So when Antero Resources started drilling next door, she organized a network of Host Farms where anyone interested in fracking can stay for a local tour. I joined a mixed crew of scientists, green builders, a small business owner, teachers, a forester, journalists and retirees organized by the nonprofit group, Wild Virginia, to camp in



Pitcock's yard over a weekend this spring. We followed Pitcock up narrow, curving roads to find wells, compressor stations, extraction plants, tanker truck "farms," and other swarms of large machines buzzing like distant bee hives, most of them tucked nearly out of sight among the hills. The smell of gas occasionally wafted by as we drove.



The Appalachian plateau here is a rolling landscape of fields and forests, dotted with modest houses, weathered barns, and grazing cattle. Many small farmers sold off their mineral rights, typically to large outside corporations, during hard times over the past century. "Mineral rights trump [surface rights](#)," Pitcock said, "even if they were signed away in the 1890s."



Today, entire forested hills are being clearcut, burned, and bulldozed into flat pads of five to ten acres. A guard in a [MarkWest](#) uniform at one of the sites confirmed that the nearby denuded hillside was being "taken down for another compressor plant" and the dirt would "fill in holes elsewhere." Pitcock speculated later that the dirt would elevate pads beside streams, "to dodge any flood plain regulations." Hundreds of miles of deforested swaths for roads and pipelines also snake across the land, [fragmenting wildlife habitats](#).



Trucks carrying the millions of gallons of water and chemicals needed for each well travel 24/7, as do the trucks [carrying away the "flowback,"](#) or used, contaminated water -- [where to](#), no one knows. Across the region, spills and accidents occur regularly; two children in Doddridge County were recently [crushed by a water tanker](#). Sometimes, gas company men rope off a [spill](#) and prohibit all media.



Roads crumble from the outside in. "Dust from truck traffic has enveloped my home for much of the last three years," said Christina Woods, a cross-county neighbor and, like Pitcock, one of many volunteers in the [Doddridge County Watershed Association](#). At a [conference](#) last fall [videotaped for YouTube](#), Woods described how she documented the spraying of contaminated flowback to dampen the dust, which made her sick.



Another neighbor wasn't home when we stopped at the finished, producing well just across the road from their yard strewn with toys. The rig was gone, leaving only a few pieces of heavy equipment, including a vent stack emitting visible fumes. According to the [WV Division of Air Quality](#), emissions of less than 6 pounds of volatile organic compounds per hour generally do not require permits. Calculating total emissions is difficult due to lack of information.

Some homeowners around the region have [won settlements](#) from the industry for illnesses caused by air and well-water pollution, but these usually come with a non-disclosure clause.

At night, we hiked up to the ridgetop behind Pitcock's house to peer down at an industrial park illuminated by blazing lights. Unidentified fluid trickled out of





equipment connecting two large above-ground reservoirs lined with black plastic, which sat just beyond a barbed wire fence studded with “No Trespassing” signs.



And that’s pretty much all any sign says. The chemicals used in fracking are trade secrets [protected by law](#) from disclosure. Trucks that may be carrying thousands of gallons of carcinogens are labeled “Residual Waste.”



Driving those trucks seems to be one of the biggest [job opportunities](#) for local people. “The industry brings its own managers,” Pitcock said, “and a transient work force mostly from out of state follows the drilling.”

Back on Pitcock’s front porch, the [East Run Band](#) entertained us with the alternately rousing and haunting music for which Appalachia is famous. Ten-year-old Silas Powell played the mandolin, along with his father on guitar and his grandfather on bass.

By the time Silas grows up, the fracking will likely be over. Other shale gas developments have an average well lifespan of approximately [eight years](#). Then the industry caps the wells and moves out. Decades might pass before fracking fluids could show up in [groundwater tables](#) beneath millions of acres.



I came home to a house powered by [ever-cheaper solar panels](#), and to the news that the first [offshore wind](#) installation in America has been permitted. With alternatives now nearly as cheap as coal, why are we sacrificing Silas to the incalculable risks of fracking?

BIO: Chris Bolgiano is the author or editor of six books and innumerable travel and nature articles. Visit www.chrisbolgiano.com. For more photos, see www.wvhostfarms.org, [Wetzel County Action Group](#), and a zillion others.

Fire on McDowell B well near Wetzel Cty., burned for 9 days, Sept. 2010. Courtesy of Wetzel Cty. Action Group.



A processing plant sits almost in a stream near the small town of Central Station, WV.



Soil slippage from well pad in Lewis Wetzel Wildlife Mgt. Area, where impounded water has created a channel to the right. Courtesy of www.wvhostfarms.org.



Photo Courtesy of WV Host Farms www.wvhostfarms.org



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