

What the frack? What happens in West Virginia can happen here

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Published online 9:56am Thursday Apr 18th, 2013

and in print issue #1216 dated Thursday Apr 18th, 2013

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One of the first finished, productive shale gas wells in Doddridge County, West Virginia. The vent stack emits excess gas and visible fumes on a regular basis to the dismay of nearby residents.

Jeanne Nicholson Siler

I have a furnace that runs on natural gas, a gas stove, a gas dryer, and a gas hot water heater. I am happy with these, especially the stove. Gas is great for cooking. It never occurred to me, however, to wonder where my gas originated until I signed on for an overnight camping trip in West Virginia.

Wild Virginia, a non-profit environmental organization based in Charlottesville, welcomes members who believe passionately in caring for the outdoors and the creatures who live there. Its members are smart people who recognize that what happens in the forests affects the air in our cities and the streams that flow into our reservoirs, as well as into rivers like the James and the Shenandoah.

Earlier this month a caravan of cars carried 17 of us over too many hairpin curves to count until we were in the northwest corner of West Virginia. We didn't go to camp at the base of a waterfall, or to hike a scenic trail, but to observe up-close the industrialization that occurs when an energy company goes after the deep natural gas supplies more than 7,000 feet under the farm houses, brick ranchers, and cow pastures that straddle the narrow mountain roads of Doddridge County.

As resident Diane Pitcock will tell you, "Doddridge County lies at the heart of all the wet gas." Wet gas, she says, has more than just natural gas. It contains other saleable gases like ethane and butane, making her underground neighborhood prime real estate.

When a single Marcellus shale well pad, like the one seen from her front porch, can produce tens of thousands of dollars worth of natural gas per day, and a single well pad is capable of supporting more than a dozen horizontal pipelines releasing methane gases for decades—you're talking big money.

And big trucks.

Pitcock and her husband, who moved to an isolated log home in West Virginia with their sons for a quiet retirement after careers in Baltimore, had no idea the words Marcellus Shale and fracking would become household words. Fracking is the nickname derived from the process also known as hydraulic fracture drilling. But it is the gas-rich Marcellus shale layer that produces the profits that drive the drilling that creates the need for so many trucks.

The Pitcocks don't know if nearby drilling operations will ruin their water supply or if they can ever recoup the value of their property. But they aren't about to be quiet about what has disturbed their quiet.

Pitcock— now the program administrator for a non-profit called the West Virginia Host Farms Program— invites guests to come see and hear the over 200-foot high drilling rig from her front porch, and to hike the ridge behind her house and look over giant "freshwater" containment pools and hear the non-stop hissing and clanking operations of a well pad just over her property line.

What should be a 15-minute drive to nearby West Union sometimes takes an hour behind tanker trucks— some bringing the water to the well-heads for the pressurized fracking process, others hauling toxic wastewater mix.

Host Farms landowners like the Pitcocks offer researchers, tree huggers, academics, journalists, and curiosity-seekers a chance to see for themselves what much of rural West Virginia has become: an industrial site. We bounced over the county roads these heavy trucks have abused. We saw crushed shoulders, plumes of dust, and acres of cleared forest, now padded with acres of gravel.

Researchers from Duke University and staffers from the National Resources Defense Council are among those they've hosted in recent months. Guests camp, as we did, in the meadow, and travel to see how capped well-heads still vent stinky methane on hot days, how pockets of heavily laden air hang in the narrow valleys on breezeless days, and hear how residents have been forced off family farms.

Instead of relaxing with her husband and sons, Pitcock, a short, determined woman with a master's degree from Johns Hopkins, a blue macaw named Harley, ducks, chickens, and a screened-in gazebo, spends most evenings researching the oddities of property law in West Virginia. The mountain state has "split estate" laws, legalities that divide property holders into landowners and mineral rights owners. In West Virginia, this is business as usual, and has been for years, she told us, because of the rich supply of oil, gas, and minerals underground.

But today's fracking is not your father's shallow vertical well drilling.

Out-of-state visitors may not be able to elect environmentally conscious officials, or fight the corporate legal muscle that protects the drilling profits, but Pitcock urges guests to go home wary of proposals threatening George Washington National Forest or U.S. Geological Survey-identified shale basins under the lower Potomac and the Delmarva peninsula. Online maps clearly show that vast swaths of the U.S.

are ripe for industrial scale extraction.

Pitcock's stories echo statements like those from the National Wildlife Federation, which warn "Despite tremendous uncertainty about both short and long-term impacts, fracking companies operate with almost no federal oversight. They're exempt from laws like the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act, and they don't have to disclose what chemicals they pump into our waterways."

Our group's mood on the Sunday drive home through the Monongahela and the George Washington National Forests was somber. Plans to hike in old growth forests helped quell the pessimism. Discussions continued on the merits of ridge top wind turbines versus offshore turbines, and the declining costs of solar panels.

I can't imagine unhooking any of my gas appliances, but I will be more thoughtful about the full cost of turning my heat up or running the dryer to "get the wrinkles out." While I enjoyed my evening campfire, despite the sky-splitting night lights of the nearby rig, I appreciated even more the information-filled weekend.

Most importantly, I plan to fulfill a commitment to Pitcock and other Host Farms Program members who gave up their weekend to educate a group of well-intentioned Virginians about the impact fracking has on their state. I promised to help spread the word. And the images. And lessons learned the hardest way.

Too many places in West Virginia no longer have the option of declaring "not in my backyard." Or even in their front yard.

For more information about West Virginia Host Farms, see www.wvhostfarms.org; for more information about Wild Virginia, see www.wildvirginia.org. For more information about fracking, look online. You don't have to dig very deep.