

Fracking Experiences from “Victory Field”, Wetzel County, WV

On Jan. 9, 2012, a group of Athens residents travelled to Wetzel County, WV to have an eyewitness view of hydraulic fracturing sites run by Chesapeake Energy, a company planning extensive fracking in our county. We were hosted by the Wetzel County Action Group. Northern Wetzel County is home to 33 Marcellus Shale gas wells and 3 compressor stations installed by Chesapeake in a 6 square mile area of the county since 2007. Chesapeake has a total of 140 wells permitted in Wetzel, and many additional wells and permits exist with other companies. What was once miles of bucolic forested and agricultural West Virginia countryside is now a rural industrial petrochemical complex. We saw numerous ridgetop drill pads and compressor stations, and spoke to several farmers who experienced significant impacts on their water, air, land, livelihoods, property values, personal health and quality of life.

From a sheep farmer’s hilltop, we saw 6 well pads and a compressor station in the surrounding viewscape. Numerous ridgetops had been cut down, leveled, and populated with drilling equipment and interconnecting pipelines. We were told that most of the well pads in the county were situated on leveled ridgetops. All of these facilities seemed surprisingly close to one another, unlike what we expected from horizontal drilling. We estimated a distance of only 2000 feet between two of the drill pads. From another landowner’s hilltop, the elevation had been reduced by 18 feet, and a 5 acre drill pad was placed 200 feet from his home, filled with storage tanks containing toxic frack water and volatile condensate, well heads, and various processing equipment. That was his living environment, with views of more drill pads on the surrounding hillsides. As we drove around the county, it was common to see ridgetops that had been lopped off by 18-55 feet that were now covered with gas wells, storage tanks, compressor stations, and huge storage ponds (many with slipping dams). While Wetzel County is higher in elevation, the general topography seemed very similar to the rolling hills of Athens County. It was disturbingly easy to imagine our area transformed in the same way.

At the sites we visited, there was no active drilling or muddy conditions. Overall, the well pads were in good shape with good gravel. All tanks, pumps, heaters, and well head “Christmas trees” were painted white and operating on several solar panel sets. The actual well sites seemed well maintained. We also viewed the exterior of a 5 compressor station and a 12 compressor station. They are used to increase the pressure for gas flow in the gathering and distribution pipelines. These sites also seemed well-maintained. These were very large facilities, occupying significant portions of flattened ridgetop land and creating a dominant presence in the viewscape. At the time of our visit, there was no noise from the stations, although we were told that it is extremely loud when they are running and broadcasting noise from these hilltop settings.

Air pollution from drill pad sources has been a serious concern in Wetzel County. Landowners documented many instances of clouds of noxious gas rising up hillsides, illegal release and plumbing of gas streams, and significant diesel pollution from the vast number of trucks, heavy equipment, drill pumps, frack pumps, and gas flaring. With drilling and high-volume trucking operations continuing 24 hours/day, 7 days/week, noise levels were constantly overwhelming and the air consistently smelled of diesel fumes plus vented and flared toxic gases from wells. Flaring of gases created breathing problems for nearby residents and flared gas condensate was noted in ground areas. After filing multiple

complaints, the Wetzel County Action Group was able to get Chesapeake to install vapor recovery systems. When forested areas were cleared for drill sites or gathering pipelines, the burning of large numbers of tree crowns created enveloping smoke clouds. The burns were started with diesel fuel and tires. The community was eventually able to get Chesapeake to chip the tops instead, which was a big improvement. High-intensity industrial lighting is used 24/7 at the compressor stations and during drilling and fracturing, illuminating the night sky, creating significant light pollution and a brightly lit nighttime display of rural industrialization.

We witnessed the aftermath of several landslides, where water holding ponds the size of football fields had dams fail and slip off the hillside. These ponds were constructed to hold the trucked-in water for drilling and fracking. We were told that Chesapeake did not employ an engineer for this. The contents had leaked the down the valley and required multiple efforts and additional land (20-30 acres) for slope stabilization. The US EPA had issued many orders for violation of Section 309 of the Clean Water Act.

We observed miles of temporary water line strung along the roadside. Chesapeake had connected temporary 8 inch plastic flexible water pipe, staked to the road shoulders with rusted metal T- posts and snaked for miles to bring fresh water to the drill sites. Someone declared it looked like 3rd world engineering. In areas where there was no drilling and the scenery beautiful, the rural beauty was destroyed by the ugliness of miles of "gerryrigged" water pipe. The tour leader said the miles of ugly pipe were better than all of the truck traffic that previously had been hauling water. The water source for this pipeline is the Ohio River. Prior to tapping the Ohio, trucks were randomly damming area creeks, pumping the water into their trucks and hauling it to the holding ponds. Several area creeks were drained, until complaints were filed with the US EPA and the practice was stopped.

At the same time, we saw where residents along Fish Creek had developed extra wells and springs on their property to prevent surface drilling near potable sources. Some landowners living near drill wells documented water that was undrinkable by humans or livestock and streams that had been polluted with frack wastewater. The residents depend on well water and springs. There is no public water line in the area, much like parts of rural Athens County.

The landowners documented over 300 rig-related truck accidents over the past year (just in this 6 sq. mile area), often closing roads for 4-8 hours, preventing residential as well as emergency access. Huge numbers of large trucks hauling drilling equipment, water and toxic fracking waste were travelling the steep, winding roads to and from their hilltop destinations 24/7, with operators working 12 hour shifts. Driver fatigue, operating during icy road conditions on steep slopes, and road failure were all noted. Numerous spills of drill mud (with associated chemicals) and frack wastewater were documented as a result of tanker truck accidents, overturned dump trucks and even dump trucks spilling from open tailgates. Roadside litter from 100's of trucks was also a large problem. After complaints from the community, Chesapeake instituted rules and fines for littering and that situation has been corrected.

The truck traffic overwhelms the structural integrity of the road system, along with the travel of emergency responders, school buses and farm type vehicles. We were told of an emergency situation with an elderly man living on a blocked road, where a Kubota tractor was used to access his property

and deliver him to the emergency squad. While on our tour, a Chesapeake Energy heavy duty pickup wrecked off the steep side of a road. The road edge had given away. The tow truck sent to pull it out was undersized. Chesapeake was paying for constant, repeated road improvements. Although roads were widened to accommodate large rig vehicles, the steep road shoulders were insufficiently stable to support the weight and volume of trucking traffic. Chesapeake refused to stop trucking during school bus times, so bus traffic is monitored by CB radio and escorted by a vehicle. Escorts are also used for larger tractor-trailer type vehicles, which occupy both lanes on curves and turns. All of this made us wonder how normal commuting, schooling and especially how ambulance services, Meals on Wheels, and oxygen services will be interrupted for those in dire need in our county.

Clearly, there is more work for volunteer fire departments (not paid positions, and not trained for highly flammable industrial fires), tow truck drivers, truck drivers, heavy equipment operators and the lodging industry. Nevertheless, there was no wealth effect in evidence. There was no indication that money went back to the community. Wetzel County still has the highest unemployment rate in WV. We saw poverty, pipelines, wealth extraction and large-scale devastation of the landscape. Sadly, most of the landowners do not own their mineral rights, and were paid a one-time damage charge of \$15-18,000. Where they had previously farmed for years, they now cannot use the 5 acre drill pad areas of their land for the next 25 years, while still having to pay the full property taxes on those parcels. Also, their property values have dropped by more than half. Some charitable organizations could no longer hold their rural retreats because hotels are booked with rig operators. Tourism revenues have decreased. Hunting and wildlife have also been impacted by the dramatic changes to the countryside. Chesapeake has made donations to local charities.

We were advised to keep a close, watchful eye on all activities related to fracking operations. In Wetzel County, they witnessed and documented a consistent pattern of negligent procedures by drillers, combined with negligible federal and state oversight, resulting in pollution of their drinking water, surface water, land and air. They photo-documented many instances of rig crews cutting corners to get things done quickly, including discharging large volumes of excess gas into the atmosphere, releasing waste water into creeks, burning toxic materials and burying toxic waste with backhoes. With this documentation, they were able work with the US EPA to get these procedures stopped, although they regularly reoccur when there is no oversight. We were also advised to photo-document pristine, natural areas that should not be disturbed. We were shown photos from 2004 of a waterfall that was destroyed in 2007 by a stream road crossing. Chesapeake was ordered to restore the waterfall. The before photos have been the key to restoration. All of the stoppage of illegal activity, establishment of better practices, or remediation of environmental damage were the direct result of community supervision and reporting.

There were social consequences as well. We heard stories from residents about the disruption of the social fabric of the community, problems with the numerous outsiders who had no regard for the community, increased crime, increased drug use and drug-dealing, local girls becoming pregnant with out-of-state fathers simply disappearing, and the need for the community action group to carry guns for protection.

The life and viewscape in Wetzel County has changed from rolling agricultural hills, woods, streams and ponds, to an industrial landscape. The ridgetops are now filled with gas wells, storage tanks, compressor stations, huge storage ponds with slipping dams, while the trucks, noise, pollution and frack waste roll on (into Southeast Ohio). As a responsible citizen, before you lease your land, support unmitigated fracking and especially if you don't own your mineral rights, you owe it to yourself and the community to view the implications firsthand. If plans for extensive hydraulic fracturing in our area materialize, we must prepare and plan for the consequences in advance, and take coordinated action to mitigate the negative impacts on our water, land, air and quality of life.

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