

NY Farmers: Fracking Means Salvation or Ruin

MARY ESCH, Associated Press



ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — When Dan Fitzsimmons looks across the Susquehanna River and sees the flares of Pennsylvania gas wells, he thinks bitterly of the riches beneath his own land locked up by the heated debate that has kept hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, out of New York.

"I go over the border and see people planting orchards, buying tractors, putting money back in their land," said Fitzsimmons, a Binghamton landowner who heads the 70,000-member Joint Landowners Coalition of New York. "We'd like to do that too, but instead we struggle to pay the taxes and to hang onto our farms."

While New York state has had a moratorium on shale gas development for four years while the Department of Environmental Conservation completes an environmental impact review, thousands of wells have gone into production in Pennsylvania. Both states, along with Ohio and West Virginia, overlie the vast Marcellus Shale deposit, which has been made productive by the advent of horizontal drilling and fracking.

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In the middle of the debate over whether the gas unlocked by fracking is worth the risks of drinking water contamination and adverse health effects are the landowners who must decide whether to sell their mineral rights. Many are dairy farmers and many struggle under heavy debt.

While Fitzsimmons and others in his coalition look south and see the land of milk and honey, other farmers point to Pennsylvania as a case history for how the shale gas boom can be disastrous to agriculture.



Pennsylvania dairy farmers Carol French and Carolyn Knapp travel to other shale gas states giving talks on gas drilling. They tell of methane-contaminated wells; contractors destroying valuable timber for access roads; pipelines making cropland inaccessible; years of agricultural production lost and uncompensated; road damage that isolates families for weeks.

"I never in my wildest dreams envisioned the industrialization that comes along with this process," Knapp told an audience in Pittsboro, N.C.

Siobhan Griffin, who raises grass-fed cows in Westville, N.Y. and sells organic cheese, doesn't see gas as the answer. Rather, she fears for her cows if drilling comes to neighboring leased land. She points to Pennsylvania, where 28 cows were quarantined from sale after they drank wastewater, and Louisiana, where 17 cows died after drinking contaminated water.

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Pennsylvania environmental regulators cited East Resources with a violation in 2010 in connection with the state Agriculture Department's quarantine. Louisiana's Department of Environmental Quality fined Chesapeake Energy and Schlumberger Technology \$22,000 each in connection with the 2010 cow deaths.

"I can't blame dairy farmers for signing," Griffin said, "because of the cheap food policy in this country. Farmers are stuck in the middle. They don't make enough margin to pay their bills."



While conventional dairy farms struggle, sustainable agriculture is growing, thanks to demand from New York City. Ken Jaffe raises grass-fed beef in the western Catskills and sells it to co-ops and high-end restaurants in the city, 160 miles to the southeast. He said gas drilling could destroy the livelihood of thousands of small farmers who cater to that market.

The Park Slope Food Cooperative, which buys upward of \$3 million worth of products from upstate farms, has told farmers its members won't buy products from any area that allows fracking, because they fear contamination. Chefs for the Marcellus, a group of restaurateurs, is calling for a ban on fracking.

Members of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York passed a resolution in January calling for a ban on fracking.

But the 30,000-member New York Farm Bureau supports natural gas development

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"as long as it can be done safely," said spokesman Jeff Williams. "We've been working with DEC to get them to craft the strongest regulations in the nation."

Landowner coalitions say they're not relying solely on the state to protect their land, but have built extensive protections into their leases.



"I turned down an offer of \$700,000 because the lease was really bad," said Jim Worden, who raises cows, corn, soybeans and oats near Binghamton. "We won't sign a lease that jeopardizes our family's future. It's not so much about money as about protecting yourself and the environment."

Fitzsimmons and other coalition members traveled to Albany recently to proclaim the rights of landowners to profit from their mineral resources and seek a halt to a growing movement of local drilling bans.

Dairy farmer Jennifer Huntington in Otsego County sued the town of Middlefield over one such ban because it prevented a planned conventional gas well on her land. A judge upheld the ban but Huntington plans to appeal.

"We would have used the royalties to update the anaerobic digester that we installed in 1984," Huntington said, referring to technology that produces methane fuel from manure. "We would have purchased a better oil seed press to more efficiently press soybeans for biodiesel. We would have invested in our farm, our land, and our employees."

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With gas prices at record lows, Worden doesn't expect drilling to expand rapidly in New York even if the DEC decides to allow fracking. If he can't profit from gas, he said he'll find another way to make ends meet.

"It's a struggle, you know, but you just do what you need to do," Worden said. "You sell some trees, do firewood, or do some work for somebody else. Same as we always have."

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