

NESAWG 2015 *It Takes a Region* Conference

Fracking Farms and Fractured Movements: Excessive Corporate Power and Politics – Our Common Challenge Presentation given by Dr. J. Stephen Cleghorn

I. Introduction

I accept, humbly, the term *farmer-emeritus* as your program calls me. I still own a 50-acre organic farm in western PA, but do not farm it every day. Tenant operators continue to build the goat creamery and organic vegetables business that my late wife Lucinda and I started 10 years ago. After she died four years ago, I realized that I did not want to continue farming without her. Fortunately, my tenants hold a similar dream as ours to contribute to a healthy, local food system, so I continue to mentor and assist them as I can.

Your program says that I "made history" in protecting my farm. That is true in a narrow sense that I placed on it a conservation easement that attempts to protect it by recognizing certain Rights of Nature possessed by my farm's ecosystems that may not be violated by an industrial activity like fracking. While there are municipalities (like Pittsburgh) and even countries (like Ecuador and Bolivia) where a Bill of Rights for Nature have been codified in law, I am told that I am the first private landowner in America trying to protect the little piece of Nature for which I am responsible in such a manner.

Before I proceed, I need to say something about why fracking is an existential threat to my farm.

Unconventional drilling is an extreme form of fossil fuel extraction that came to Pennsylvania in 2004. Wells are drilled a mile down vertically and a mile out horizontally in a process known as "hydraulic fracturing" or "fracking. As much as 2-9 million gallons of fresh water are "slicked" with 80 tons of chemicals, per well, many of these carcinogenic, some kept secret from the public, mixed with silica sand, and then the entire mixture blasted into the shale at 15,000 psi, opening up cracks to release the gas. Well pads 5-10 acres in size, with about 8 wells drilled per pad to extract gas from a square mile area below. About 1,500 diesel truck trips per well drilled. At the surface, in Pennsylvania alone, thousands of miles of new roads, gathering pipelines, compressor stations, cryogenic midstream facilities and major new 36-inch pipelines to carry the gas to markets. The toxic waste "flowback" that comes back up carries radioactive elements from the shale and must be hauled away to be shot at high pressure down injection wells. A 50-year plan for Pennsylvania will construct 150,000 such wells connected by an industrial overlay at the surface that will spread over half the land mass of the state. The unprecedented fact of fracking is this: instead of zoning off a toxic industrial practice, we are putting fracking right on top where people have their farms, homes and schools, and throughout our forests. With that comes ruined water and toxic air emissions, including tons of methane emissions hastening climate change.

As Joan Gassow at my table this morning said, "Fracking proves us an insane species."

Six months after my wife died I stood up and declared that my farm would remain *forever inviolate* of shale gas extraction. Surrounded by 50 anti-fracking activists on May 10, 2012, I said this while dropping a portion of her ashes onto the high pasture that she loved so much:

"I act in the spirit of the founders of this nation who proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence that "the Laws of Nature and Nature's God" entitled them to throw off the oppression of the British Crown. Fracking for methane gas (is) an extreme form of fossil fuel extraction that represents a much bigger oppression that is bearing down on all of us... This American flag beside me is losing its potency as a symbol of justice and freedom. The republic for which it stands is being bought and sold as though being traded on the commodities market. We are losing our democracy. Governments are protecting corporations, not people."

II. Why I Am Here Speaking to You Today

These words point to why the conference organizers asked me to speak today. I come to you as an "impacted one," and to speak for me and others whose lives have been hit hard by fracking. If I may, I want to speak the most of others much more harmed than me.

Last year at this conference I said: "First they must fracture the community, and then they can fracture the shale." Small farmers are part of a community that sustains itself on common values, a devotion to hard work and care for the land. These values are inimical to the gas industry's need to turn the countryside into an industrialized gas field that yields easy money for a few at the expense of the many. When the big money comes in, there is a loss of community cohesion and the land loses its mooring in Nature as it becomes commoditized for private profit above all other values.

The second reason I am here today is to say something more about corporate power and money in politics, a point of common ground for all of us in this room who are involved in progressive movements often blocked or frustrated by corporate power.

Money in politics is at the root of why fracking came to Pennsylvania, and why it continues to grow. As of 2015, the gas industry has spent \$47 million lobbying Pennsylvania state and local officials. \$8.2 million contributed to Pennsylvania candidates and their PACs.

Lastly, the most essential reason I am here has to do with the theme of this conference – building movements within movements, connecting with other movements, so that we sit down at the table and eat not only well, but with justice present in how the food came to be before us.

III. Speaking for Impacted Ones

Certainly I have been impacted by fracking, but not because my farm has a well pad on it. The nearest well is four miles away. Yet fracking has become the focus of my life.

Just as this conference is focused on creating a just, sustainable and regenerative food system, my advocacy for a ban on fracking is not a thing unto itself. My conservation easement may be *sui generis* as a matter of one property owner who came up with a unique legal instrument to protect Nature on my farm, but the experience of suffering brought on by shale gas extraction has hit others much harder than me.

Shalefield Stories

I draw your attention to this booklet I hold up here. It is called *Shalefield Stories*. A display copy is on the resource table #19 with information about how you can get a copy. A donation of any amount will go to people who have been grievously harmed by fracking. There are 18 stories here, but let me just give you three as examples:

C.J. Bevins, 23 years old, crushed by a machine on an unstable job site in Smyrna, NY, forced to work too fast, doing 16 hour shifts for two weeks straight, the only son of Nancy Bevins, father of a baby boy, his death resulting in a \$4,900 OSHA fine to the company. His mother said afterwards: "Life became observed, not lived."

Frac sand mining in Wisconsin, affecting native American communities, the air filled with silica dust, residents buying \$1,000 HEPA filters to keep the dust out of their homes, looking at a future with silicosis.

Michelle Beegle in Bedford County, PA, on her land since 1983, speaking wistfully of those days when "everyone got along...everyone was family... we kept an eye on each other...you could count on people...(but) now there's a division between people." Watching her cows dwindle away and die after the compressor station came in... blacking out in her yard after a blow-off from the compressor station, falling so many times that she cracked all but one rib, her husband and 27-year old son diagnosed as sterile with extremely low testosterone levels. Her \$125,000 home devalued by the bank below the \$33,000 she still owes on it, so she is stuck.

Then there are studies. Heavily-fracked counties in PA have 14% greater infant mortality, 23% greater perinatal mortality, 3.4% more low-weight births, 12% more premature births, and **35% more cancer in children ages zero to four.** Cardiovascular disease is most strongly associated with living near well sites, and associated with a 40 percent increase in the likelihood of a woman giving birth before 37 weeks of gestation (considered pre-term). All these studies from major universities, all peer-reviewed.

Corporate Silencing – a tale of the disappeared, American style

The people profiled in *Shalefield Stories* and all the studies have been rendered largely invisible by the corporate juggernaut of advertisements from the gas industry, the "Think About It" commercials that have even made it onto National Public Radio, disseminating lies about climate impacts and the safety record of the industry. The ill health of people in the gas fields, their ruined water and dangerous air, the expendability of its workers – all of that would be rendered almost completely invisible.

When I declared my farm off limits to fracking, I was joined by my neighbor, organic fruit farmer Jenny Lisak, who released a document called "The Harmed, the Sickened, the Dead and the Disappeared." It compiled more than 200 cases of people and animals living in gas fields who had become sick and died from exposure to air and water contamination associated with gas field facilities. Now it has more than 16,500 cases. The list has gone worldwide since then as the "List of the Harmed" – easily available online by that name.

Dr. Sandra Steingraber has said that such stories and facts make it plain that fracking is a human rights issue. Yet the industry's bullhorn shouts down each of them and sows doubt as to causation and essentially "disappears" these reports and these people.

And lest we forget, as organic food producers, "US agriculture is highly reliant on synthetic nitrogen fertilizer...synthesized in a process fueled by natural gas." Thus the American Farm Bureau supports additional production of oil and natural gas.

IV. Movements Within Movements – points of connection

So what do we do? How do we fight our separate battles - to end fracking, for healthy and local food systems, for a reduction in greenhouse gases and stabilization of our climate, for a renewable energy future, for communities based on tolerance and love and nonviolence? How do we connect our movements?

My email Inbox of just the past two weeks gives some indication of movements within which I breathe and useful to me as I fight fracking.

- High school kids in Oregon using "**Public Trust**" law to sue the state for failure to act on climate change.
- **Food and Water Watch**, and its book *Foodopoly*.
- **Organic Consumers Association**
- **Black Lives Matter** – about police brutality, mass incarceration, yes, but also about poverty and jobs and education, minimum wage and environmental injustice.
- **Food Democracy Now** fighting for labeling GMOs.
- **350.org** leading on climate change
- **PowerShift** youth seeking a more localized energy and food economies, even de-growth strategies that challenge economic growth that kills.
- Dozens more to which I pay attention – erosion of voting rights, the rise of the oligarchic state and movements to reclaim democracy, a constitutional amendment to overturn Citizens United, state preemption laws to prevent community control of oil and gas development – it is a long list.

And now, coming here: "Farm to Institution New England" and "Red Tomato Righteous Produce" (I love that!) and "Indian Ladder Farms" and the "Crossroads Resource Center" – and on and on. Wow!

On the Vanguard of a New Way of Living within Nature

My emails suggest the depth and breadth of battles on multiple fronts that are being waged now, of which our fight for local food systems is a part, to sustain our planet, to regenerate living systems, and to push back on the corporations and the corrupted, oligarchic state that are wreaking havoc on our generation and generations to come.

I believe we are at the vanguard of figuring out how to live with one another and within Nature. Naomi Klein in *This Changes Everything* has said: "**There are no non-radical options left on the table when it comes to climate change.**" But she has also said this: "**Climate change is not just a disaster. It's also our best chance to demand and build a better world.**"

Fracking is part of an aggressive belligerent Cachexia afflicting the body politic, at the center of which is the fossil fuel industry. The agriculture and food industry is also so afflicted. The political process itself has been deeply contaminated by big money. Whether it is community rights, our right of clean water and clean air, or our right to pass on a sustainable planet to future generations – with fracking and food systems we are seeing the same result we see when cancer acts to destroy its host, the human body.

Your movement to create sustainable, regenerative, local food systems is a worthy part of the whole, and it connects to thousands of others who are fighting the fracking that threatens our organic farming; and that connects to those who are trying to wake up others to the existential threat of climate change; and that connects to people who are trying to reclaim our democracy and get money out of politics; and that connects to people fighting for environmental justice for poor and rural and brown and black and First Nations people who seems to always be the first to get bulldozed; and that connects to struggles for racial justice and a living wage; and that....well, you get the point.

Let me end with the words American poet Wallace Stevens:

"After the final 'no' there comes a 'yes'
And on that 'yes' the future world depends."

The fossil fuel industry in PA plans 40 more years of "No" to the life, health and well-being of future generations by saying "No" to making the change to renewable energy sources. We want to be part of the generation that says "Yes" to life for innumerable generations out. That's why we are here today. That's why we do the work we do.