

A Call for Faithful Stewardship of God's Creation: Reflections on Natural Gas Drilling and Leasing National Council of Churches in Christ

Purpose

To involve members of churches in biblical and theological discussion of the issue of drilling for gas, in order for them to feel equipped and motivated to engage in discussions and decisions about drilling in their own communities.

The Situation

The increase in gas prices and the inability of many small-scale farmers to make their land profitable has resulted in landowners signing, or contemplating signing, leases offered by gas companies to drill on their land. Signing a drilling lease appears to be one way that people can retain their land and make a profit. Gas companies claim that drilling has economic benefits to an area, including increased employment.

The Call to Stewardship

The Lord God placed the human in the Garden of Eden to serve it and to protect it (Genesis 2:15)

The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it (Psalm 24:1)

As people of faith, we affirm that creation belongs not to us but to God. We further affirm that God has commanded us to act as faithful "stewards": entrusting us to serve and protect the habitat God has created, including all its inhabitants.

We in the faith community call upon our members to exercise great caution when asked to sign drilling and mineral leases. Faithful stewardship requires that priority be given to protecting the health of the land in a way that conveys our love of God and neighbor, and that consideration be given to future generations and to the rest of creation.

Is Gas Drilling Compatible with Faithful Stewardship?

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others (Philippians 2:4)

Oil and gas companies have repeatedly assured us that drilling and exploration can take place in an ecologically responsible manner that protects the interests not only of private land holders who sign lease agreements, but also the economic and environmental interests of the wider community. When these promises are met, they are compatible with our stewardship responsibilities to God, neighbor, and creation. We are concerned about reports indicating that violations routinely occur in 60% of the sites inspected.¹

The following newspaper story narrates the personal experience of a community in Pennsylvania:

Western PA landowners regret deep gas wells deals

By Tom Kane

WASHINGTON COUNTY, PA - At first, farmer Ron Gulla and horse farm owner Joyce Mitchell were excited about the prospect of making money from gas drilling. Now, after more than two years of the presence of drilling companies with their heavy trucks and huge drill rigs, they and many of their neighbors wish they had never signed a lease.



“They say one thing to you when they want you to sign, and quite another thing when you’ve signed your land over to them and they begin to do what they want to it,” Mitchell said.

Stone dust gushes into the air from a gas drilling rig on a horse farm in Hickory, PA.

Mitchell said the gas company, Range Resources, a subsidiary of Halliburton, told her they would drill only one well. Then, when gas was discovered in a nearby well, they came in and drilled four over her and her husband’s objections.

Gulla, has had his 141-acre farm destroyed by the drilling, he said. His water well gets muddy whenever it rains, which never occurred before the drilling. The water in his pond is brackish and he has had a fish kill.

“People are getting methane in their well like I am,” he said. “It’s happening all around me.”

Gulla, Alexander and Mitchell said that the drilling companies are ruining their once bucolic countryside. “The worst part of it is that the damage they are doing can never be reversed,” Gulla said. “It is forever.”²

In what ways can gas drilling challenge our being good stewards?

The land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying (Hosea 4:1-3)

“I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce,” says the Lord. “But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable.” (Jeremiah 2:7)

As each of us attempts to decide how to fulfill our moral obligation to care for and protect God’s creation, we must educate ourselves about the potential hazards associated with gas drilling and exploration. Here are a few of those hazards:³

Air Quality

A wide range of contaminants are released into the air during the gas development process. These contaminants include heavy metals, toxic chemicals, and radioactive elements. Human and environmental costs associated with these contaminants include acid rain, central nervous system disorders, miscarriages, and increases in the occurrence and severity of allergies, asthma, and other lung ailments.

Water Quality

Gas drilling now makes use of a process known as “hydraulic fracturing.” This process injects from one to nine million gallons of highly pressurized water into each well. Such high-volume water usage has the potential to deplete aquifers, lakes, streams, and other sources of drinking water and aquatic habitat.

Hydraulic fracturing also injects chemicals into the gas well and brings to the surface chemicals that normal occur underground. Many of these chemicals are toxic and can leach into the soil and groundwater.

“Fracked” wastewater is stored in open pits during well operation. These pits can overflow or leak. The EPA reports that humans and animals living in or drinking water



A waste pond is man made; it is used to dispose of contaminated waters created as a result of natural gas and other types of drilling.

contaminated by waste pits “may experience negative health effects or death, depending on the level of contamination.”

Wildlife Disruption and Livestock Mortality

Wastewater ponds can be a fatal attraction to migratory birds, bats, and other wildlife who mistake the ponds for wetlands. Contaminants leaked from wells and waste ponds can be taken up by vegetation; health problems may occur in wildlife and livestock that eat the contaminated plants.

Land Degradation and Habitat Loss

Although each well is only about a foot wide, 2 - 5 acres usually need to be cleared in order to hold the rigs, equipment, pits, storage tanks, and other machinery. Drill sites may require additional clearing of land for new roads and transmission lines to transport the gas off site. Wells usually are developed in a “grid” pattern covering large areas of land and extending over many contiguous properties. This large-scale clearing of land can cause soil erosion and may adversely impact wildlife by removing natural vegetation and fragmenting habitats.



A piece of land after all of the natural gas has been removed by a drilling company.

Additional Hazards

Gas is a volatile compound with a high risk of explosion, fire, and hazardous material release.

Drilling destroys scenic beauty and recreational opportunities, resulting in decreased revenue from ecotourism and other nature-based activities such as hunting and fishing. In addition, the presence of gas wells on a piece of property decreases the resale value of the property and depresses the real estate value of the neighborhood.

What Must We Do To Be Faithful Stewards?

I have set before you life and death, blessing and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to God’s voice, and hold fast to God.
(Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

As landowners consider leasing their piece of the garden to energy companies, or wonder what to do next if they have already signed a lease, we all must remember that while economic prosperity is a desirable characteristic of a community characterized by “Shalom”, a critical part of our moral and spiritual duty is to protect creation for ourselves and for future generations,. The earth and every creature in it is a precious gift entrusted to us by God. When we honor this Gift, we honor the Giver.

¹ Statistics drawn from *Earthworks*, <http://www.earthworksaction.org/pitpollution.cfm>.

² Tom Kane, “Western PA landowners regret deep gas wells deals,” *The River Reporter Online* (April 10- April 16, 2008). Available at: <http://www.riverreporter.com/issues/08-04-10/head1-drilling.html>.

³ The following resources were used for the information in this section: Earthworks, “Air Contaminants,” <http://www.earthworksaction.org/aircontaminants.cfm>. Earthworks, “Pit Pollution,” <http://www.earthworksaction.org/pitpollution.cfm>. Earthworks, “Oil and Gas Pollution,” <http://www.earthworksaction.org/oilgaspollution.cfm>. Delaware Riverkeeper, “Fact Sheet: Natural Gas Well Drilling and Production,” <http://www.delawariverkeeper.org/newsresources/factsheet.asp?ID=72>.