

"I'm scared for my kids," says Simons (with boyfriend Jason Lumphere). They made sure their kids were out of the house when she demonstrated her water's flammability.



LIVING WITH 'FRACKING'

WHERE THE WATER CATCHES FIRE

The profits and pitfalls of natural gas drilling are dividing Pennsylvanians **BY NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN**

One day last February, the water out of Jodie Simons's kitchen faucet was running black. Simons called the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection the next morning, and two days later an agent arrived, filled a bottle from her tap, took it outside and lit the water on fire. "She told us the methane levels were so high we should keep our windows open to make sure our house didn't explode," says Simons, a bartender in Monroeton, Pa.

A DEP investigation into the cause of her flammable water is ongoing, but Simons, 28, is one of many Pennsylvanians who believe a controversial method of extracting gas from shale in the area is behind the trouble. The month before the dark water incident, Chief Oil & Gas, a major gas driller, had finished tapping gas from rocks buried thousands of feet below a neighbor's yard, using a technique called hydraulic fracturing or "fracking," which involves forcing sand, dozens of chemicals—some of them

toxic—and water into shale to fracture it and release gas. Natural gas drilling is currently going on in 31 states, but nowhere are communities more divided than in Pennsylvania, where drilling is at a fever pitch. In December the EPA acknowledged a link between fracking and well-water pollution in Wyoming. Similar tests are under way in Pennsylvania. Experts say the gas reserves in the Marcellus Shale could "supply the whole country with natural gas for 20 years," says Penn State geoscientist Terry Engelder, whose research is credited with spurring the regional gas rush. Asked about Simons's ignitable water, he says, "A lot of people in northeastern Pennsylvania have been able to light faucets for a long time. Drilling has exacerbated the situation, but to insinuate that this is *all* a consequence of drilling is wrong."



**FOR
FRACKING**

“If we can get away from our dependence on foreign oil, that’s big,” says Karen Crain (above, with husband Keith near their farm), on why they support drilling.



**AGAINST
FRACKING**

“I don’t want my kids to grow up living in this,” says Simons (left) with Lumphere (giving bottled water to their horse named Punker because their well water is contaminated).

In fact, plenty of residents have welcomed the drilling. In Rome, Pa., 15 miles from Simons, former dairy farmers Keith and Karen Crain may not be thrilled to have gas wells on their 217-acre property, but they are plenty pleased financially. They were paid \$81,000 for the rights to drill on their property and could also receive royalties that will make them millionaires.

Even setting money aside, says Karen, 58, “For the most part, we’re positive about it.” The drilling has also brought welcome jobs. A December study by Colorado’s IHS Global Insight projected that shale drilling could support 870,000 U.S. jobs by 2015. “What we’re talking about here is the resuscitation of blue-collar industries that haven’t been seen in these parts for decades,” says Chris Tucker, spokesman for Energy in Depth, an advocacy group for the oil and gas industry. “Those jobs are back, hundreds of thousands of them.” Nowhere is that more true than Bradford County. “Basically, if you want a job, you can get a job,” says Bradford County Commissioner Doug McLinko. Local business owner Tracy Keeney agrees. “I’ve gone from 12 employees three years ago to 28 people today,” says Keeney, owner of B & K Construction Equip-

ment in Wyalusing. “Our income has grown by 75 percent.”

But for some, economic gain doesn’t justify potential environmental damage. “Folks think that the industry can provide good jobs,” says G. Terry Madonna, who conducted an August 2011 poll that showed Pennsylvanians almost equally divided in their opinion of fracking. “But they

whose water goes bad. (Simons and four of her neighbors with similar water issues received ones from Chief, though the company denies causing the problems.) The changes seem unlikely to slow, and the community could very well become even more polarized. “Those people who are well-haters are oblivious to the good it’s doing,” charges one Wilmot woman who did not want her name used because of potential repercussions. “The rest of the state, especially the farming areas, are dying.”

Still, some are wondering if the cost is too high. Last May the DEP fined a subsidiary of Chesapeake Energy Corporation \$900,000 for contaminating more than a dozen private water wells in Bradford County, including that of Jared and Heather McMicken of Wyalusing, whose water went bad after drilling began on a neighbor’s property. In August 2010, the McMickens, who have two young children, had to evacuate the family in the middle of the night after the methane in their home hit explosive levels. Their home, once worth \$250,000, has been appraised at just \$35,500 with its water problems, which means they’re stuck. “I don’t feel safe,” says Heather, 34. “I’m scared every minute.” ●

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DO PEOPLE HAVE PROBLEMS? ABSOLUTELY. HAS THERE BEEN A LARGE NUMBER? NO”

—DOUG McLINKO, BRADFORD COUNTY COMMISSIONER

want to protect the environment.”

In the meantime, rural areas like picturesque Bradford County are being transformed. Gas tankers clog the two-lane roads, drilling rigs dot the horizon, and, in addition to the fields of grazing cows, there are now “water buffaloes,” large water tanks that the gas companies provide (and fill) to people