

Others win, we all lose

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S. Thomas Bond: Gas drilling -- Others win, we all lose

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- I have dealt with gas companies for a lifetime, and have studied the present situation with Marcellus drilling. This is my analysis of my situation:

First, I have to face the fact the productive capacity of my surface estate will be diminished by the driller's ability to commandeer a pad to drill on, an access right of way, and an egress right of way for the gas. All of this will diminish the productive value of my property into the future. Although the individual wells will not be productive beyond seven to 10 years, six or eight might be drilled from the same pad, and the use of the pad might continue for decades, as will the rights of way.

For pasture, grass will be present for erosion control, hopefully, but it will be fenced off when drilling is being done. Since the usual practice is to drill one or two wells at a time, there is likely to be three or more periods when the pad area and access road is completely fenced off. During these periods, dust will blow from the operation onto adjacent pasture or meadow, reducing the value of the grass growing there. The rain that falls on these areas will become a drainage problem, especially in winter, if drilling is done then.

Forest removed for pipelines will be out of production for the length of time the pipes are used, perhaps 40 years, plus 70 years for a crop to mature after the end of operations.

Whether wells will be plugged and pipelines are removed after production remains to be seen. With the gas and oil gone in 40 years, will there be energy and capital available to take the iron out of the ground? If history is any guide, those who manage and benefit from production of gas will be reluctant to remove their facilities. There are thousands of unplugged older wells and the coal industry did not remediate damage from mines.

This will surely reduce the value of the surface owner's estate, and eventually reduce the property tax he or she must pay. With hundreds of wells, it will reduce the tax base of the county.

That is not the end of it.

Some will have loss of ground water -- a catastrophe. Everywhere fracturing has been used, some people have lost their ground water. The industry has struggled against recognizing this with all its force. They have gone into contortions to prove frack water never comes to the surface from the horizontal portion of the well, using isotope measurements and expert opinion. The truth is likely nearer the surface -- improper sealing of the strata they drill through.

If contamination of pristine water occurs within a few weeks or a very few months after drilling, it is prima facie proof the drilling caused it. If slightly deeper water is allowed to come up less than or a few hundred of feet to contaminate the aquifer, it is just as much the fault of the drilling as if it came up several thousand.

Hopefully, buried waste, flowback water, exposed subsoil, erosion caused by drainage, buried steel anchors and cable and such like will be avoided by appropriate legislation. And dangerous water will be kept from domestic animals.

Nor is this the end of it.

Once the public is onto the problem, it is going to be difficult to sell a farm or tract. Who will want to buy land subject to such problems? What banker will loan money to buy such problem-ridden land? What is the morality of a real estate dealer who would disguise or neglect this additional, unseen burden from a prospective buyer? What insurer will want to take such a tract, except at bargain basement value, as security on a loan?

Who will want to buy such land and invest a life in making it productive? A person who buys land expects to put in endless hours building fences, spraying weeds and clipping pasture. He expects to erect buildings, to invest in livestock and machinery. Who will want to do that if he has to constantly deal with ongoing operations every few years? How much will the value of property be reduced?

And what about the people who have secondary interest in my farm? Hunting will be affected. Lots of landowners have paid hunting, and some, fishing. Hopefully, utilities over the land will be minimally affected. Perhaps some will have to move overhead lines or protect some underground pipes.

One of the values of rural living is the enjoyment of peace and quiet, the scenery, the decreased likelihood of crime. That will be interrupted. It might come as a surprise to people who mostly have their attention limited by four walls that rural people enjoy their surroundings in lieu of entertainment others pay for.

My neighbors and our heirs lose part of our capital and some of the anticipated income from our properties. We will find it necessary to deal in a very unequal way with companies taking rights from contracts made many decades ago by people who never dreamed of modern drilling with its hundreds of truck loads of water, chemicals, sand, crushed rock and pipe, or dreamed of the back hoes, bulldozers and vast drilling rigs weighing several hundred tons, and the endless too and fro of personal pickups that accompanies gas extraction on steroids. And we lose quiet enjoyment of our chosen life. Virtually without compensation for any of it. Others win, we lose.

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