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Some anti-drilling activists change tactics, tone

Some anti-drilling activists change tactics, sign leases and try to work with industry

AP

By Kevin Begos and Michael Rubinkam, Associated Press October 6, 2013 11:09 AM

PITTSBURGH (AP) -- For years, activists have warned that fracking can have disastrous consequences — ruined water and air, sickened people and animals, a ceaseless parade of truck traffic.

Now some critics are doing what was once unthinkable: working with the industry. Some are even signing lucrative gas leases and speaking about the environmental benefits of gas.

In one northeastern Pennsylvania village that became a global flashpoint in the debate over fracking, the switch has raised more than a few eyebrows.

A few weeks ago, Victoria Switzer and other activists from Dimock endorsed a candidate for governor who supports natural gas production from gigantic reserves like the Marcellus Shale, albeit with more regulation and new taxes. Dimock was the centerpiece of "Gasland," a documentary that galvanized opposition to fracking, and Switzer was also featured in this summer's "Gasland Part II," which aired on HBO.

"We had to work with the industry. There is no magic wand to make this go away," said Switzer, who recently formed a group that seeks to work with drillers on improved air quality standards. "Tunnel vision isn't good. Realism is good."

For Switzer, the endorsement was a nod to reality; for some of her onetime allies, a betrayal. Either way, it was a sign that anti-drilling activism is evolving, with some opponents shifting tactics to reflect that shale gas is likely here to stay.

Plenty of anti-drilling activists still want nothing to do with the industry and continue to call for a ban on fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, the technique that drillers use to siphon gas from shale deposits more than a mile underground. In New York state, opponents have so far succeeded in blocking natural-gas development in the Marcellus Shale.

But Pennsylvania residents concerned about drilling no longer have the luxury of simply calling for a ban, Switzer said. Not with the Pennsylvania and West Virginia portions of the Marcellus already yielding more than \$10 billion worth of gas annually, making it the nation's most prolific gas field.

"It's in full swing, and it's simplistic to think you could just tell them all to stop," said Rebecca Roter, another Pennsylvania activist.

The enormous volume of gas flowing from the Marcellus and other U.S. shale formations has turned energy markets upside-down and led to wholesale prices that are about one-third of what customers in Europe or Asia pay. That's led to lower costs for consumers and industry.

And that, in turn, got the attention of Vermont's anti-fracking governor.

It was Gov. Peter Shumlin who, in early 2012, signed the nation's first statewide fracking ban. But now he's promoting the economic benefits of natural gas. Last month, Shumlin spoke out in favor of a \$90 million expansion of the state's natural gas pipeline system — which will transport fracked gas — saying the project was critical to industry, the environment and people who are struggling to pay energy bills.

Some drilling critics, meanwhile, have become reluctant partners with an industry they dislike.

Robert Donnan had been an outspoken critic of drilling in general and Range Resources, the company that sunk the first Marcellus well in 2004, in particular. In February, he leased his land to Range, according to public documents obtained by The Associated Press.

Donnan didn't respond to requests for comment, nor did members of the group to which he belongs, Marcellus Protest, whose stated goal is to "stop the destruction of our environment and communities caused by Marcellus drilling."

But one of Donnan's cousins said family members felt they had little real choice, considering their 296-acre property southwest of Pittsburgh is already surrounded by drilling.

"The choice is either sign the lease and have some control, or don't sign and have no control" over what happens in the area, said Geoffrey Smith, adding the family will still keep an eye on everything the drillers do.

"We're watching for any spills, any violation of the lease, for any hanky-panky with the money," said Smith, who praised his cousin for keeping the industry's "feet to the fire" on environmental issues.

Donnan is still speaking out, too. In the spring, he published a letter to the editor saying "gas production is filthy business." He also denounced drilling at a public forum in Pittsburgh — though without telling the audience he had signed a lease.

Range spokesman Matt Pitzarella said the company views Donnan's decision to sign a lease after years of criticizing the industry "as an endorsement" of drilling, since he's clearly aware of the risks involved.

Some environmental groups are seeking to partner with the industry in a different way.

In southwestern Pennsylvania, environmentalists recently joined charitable foundations and major oil and gas companies to form the Center for Sustainable Shale Development, which aims to protect air and water from pollution in the Appalachian region. And in Illinois, industry and environmental groups worked together to support a bill on fracking that both sides could support.

That's similar to what Switzer is trying to accomplish in Dimock, the tiny crossroads where pro- and anti-drilling forces descended after state regulators held a gas driller responsible for contaminating residential water supplies with methane.

More than a year after Switzer and other residents settled their lawsuit against Cabot Oil & Gas Corp., the rancor has mostly subsided. And Switzer settled on a new approach to the industry that she calls her "landlord."

"You have to sit down and not be the enemy," she said.

This year, Switzer and Roter co-founded Breathe Easy Susquehanna County, an organization that seeks to persuade companies to use advanced technologies to limit emissions. The group has won plaudits for its non-confrontational style.

It's a small, quiet effort to set aside philosophical differences over the wisdom of natural gas production and focus on how the negative impacts can be minimized. The group has even attracted pro-drilling residents who had clashed with Switzer and others who spoke out against the industry.

Switzer and Roter said it's time to move past the pro-gas, anti-gas dichotomy. The reality, they point out, is that thousands of wells have already been drilled, new compressor stations are going up and pipelines are being laid.

At Breathe Easy, Roter said, "we decided our first goal was to make concern about air quality mainstream as mainstream as going to church in this rural county."

Rubinkam reported from northeastern Pennsylvania.