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'Gasland' sequel asserts drillers corrupting gov't

'Gasland' sequel asserts drilling companies are helping corrupt government; industry disagrees

AP

By Michael Rubinkam, Associated Press July 6, 2013 11:31 AM

Josh Fox galvanized the U.S. anti-fracking movement with his incendiary 2010 documentary "Gasland." Now he's back with a sequel — and this time, he's targeting an audience of just one.

"We want the president to watch the movie, and we want him to meet with the people who are in it," says Fox, whose "Gasland Part II" makes its HBO debut Monday.

He contends President Barack Obama's professed support of drilling and fracking for natural gas ignores the environmental and public health toll of the drilling boom: "It looks like he's really sincere and earnest in his desire to take on climate change, but he's got the completely wrong information and thus the completely wrong plan."

A typically bold statement from Fox, who's emerged as one of the nation's most visible and outspoken foes of the natural gas drilling industry.

Having made his name as an avant-garde theater director in New York City, Fox took an interest in drilling after a gas company approached him in 2008 about leasing his family's wooded 20-acre spread in Milanville, Pa., near the Delaware River. What resulted was "Gasland," a polemic that argued energy companies are turning whole communities into toxic industrial wastelands.

"Part II" covers a lot of the same ground as the Emmy-winning and Oscar-nominated original, as Fox takes his banjo and camera on the road again to interview residents who say their air and water were contaminated by drilling. Beleaguered homeowners demonstrate how they can light their methane-laced tap water on fire — same as in "Gasland" — though the pyrotechnics in "Part II" are more spectacular.

What's new here is the focus on what Fox sees as the drilling industry's corrupting influence on politicians and regulators. In "Gasland Part II," the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is cast in the role of protector and defender. The agency starts to hold the industry to account for contaminating heavily drilled neighborhoods in Dimock, Pa.; Parker County, Texas; and

Pavillion, Wyo. Then the drillers get to work, buying off politicians who, in turn, force the EPA to back off. Meanwhile, Obama's 2012 State of the Union address sets the tone for an election-year policy shift that replaces science with political expediency.

Fox portrays an industry that is shadowy and malevolent, the power behind the throne of government.

"I felt like I could see it: a horizontal well bore, drilled down into the earth, snaking underneath the Congress, shooting money up through the chamber at such high pressure that it blew the top off of our democracy," he narrates. "Another layer of contamination due to fracking, not the water, not the air, but our government."

Of course, the industry doesn't see it that way. Energy companies call Fox an extremist who spreads lies and misinformation about fracking, the technique that's allowed drilling companies to extract huge volumes of natural gas from rock formations deep underground.

"The real reason that shale development has expanded is not because of some nefarious plot on the part of industry leaders wearing black robes," writes Steve Everley of Energy In Depth, an industry-funded PR group. "Rather, it's because people across the United States have recognized that there are massive environmental and economic benefits to be reaped. ... Both political parties are pushing for increased responsible natural gas production, and it's because of the facts, not because they've been 'captured' by Corporate America."

Attitudes and positions about fracking have only hardened since the original "Gasland." Anti-drilling activists and Big Gas tend to view the other with profound distrust, and there is little common ground.

But the reality is more complicated than either side would probably care to admit.

Landowners have become overnight millionaires, businesses catering to the gas industry have boomed and cheap gas has lowered utility bills. Some climate scientists say the rapid conversion of coal-fired power plants to natural gas has helped reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This is a side of the shale gas revolution that "Gasland Part II" ignores.

Yet it's also true that drilling has contaminated residential water wells and brought incredible truck traffic to rural roads never designed to handle it. Some residents have complained about underhanded industry leasing tactics; others assert that gas drilling has made them sick.

The industry's typical response? Gloss over problems or deny them outright.

Driving home the point, "Part II" plays audio from an industry conference in Texas at which a drilling company official encourages the use of military-style psychological operations, or PSYOPS, to counteract anti-fracking fervor. At the same conference, another company's PR rep urges his colleagues to read the military's counterinsurgency field manual "because we are dealing with an insurgency" — namely, anti-drilling residents and environmentalists.

Fox said the industry has smeared homeowners who dared to speak up about their ruined water or ill health, employing tactics used by the tobacco industry decades ago to mislead the public about the dangers of smoking.

It's no wonder environmental activists and industry can't bridge the divide, he said.

"I don't see a middle ground. What we're talking about here is a force of people who are trying desperately to change the world, and a fossil fuel industry that is trying desperately to keep ruling it. I don't know what a middle ground would be," Fox said.

Beyond "Gasland Part II," the filmmaker is working on a short documentary about what he calls an "epidemic of illness" among gas industry workers. Longer term, he said, he intends to move on to broader issues of climate and sustainability.

And then there's that meeting with the president.

"I'm hoping for a call one of these days," Fox said.