

# The Injustice of Fracking

Yes, we need gas. But at what cost?

BY DENNIS SADOWSKI

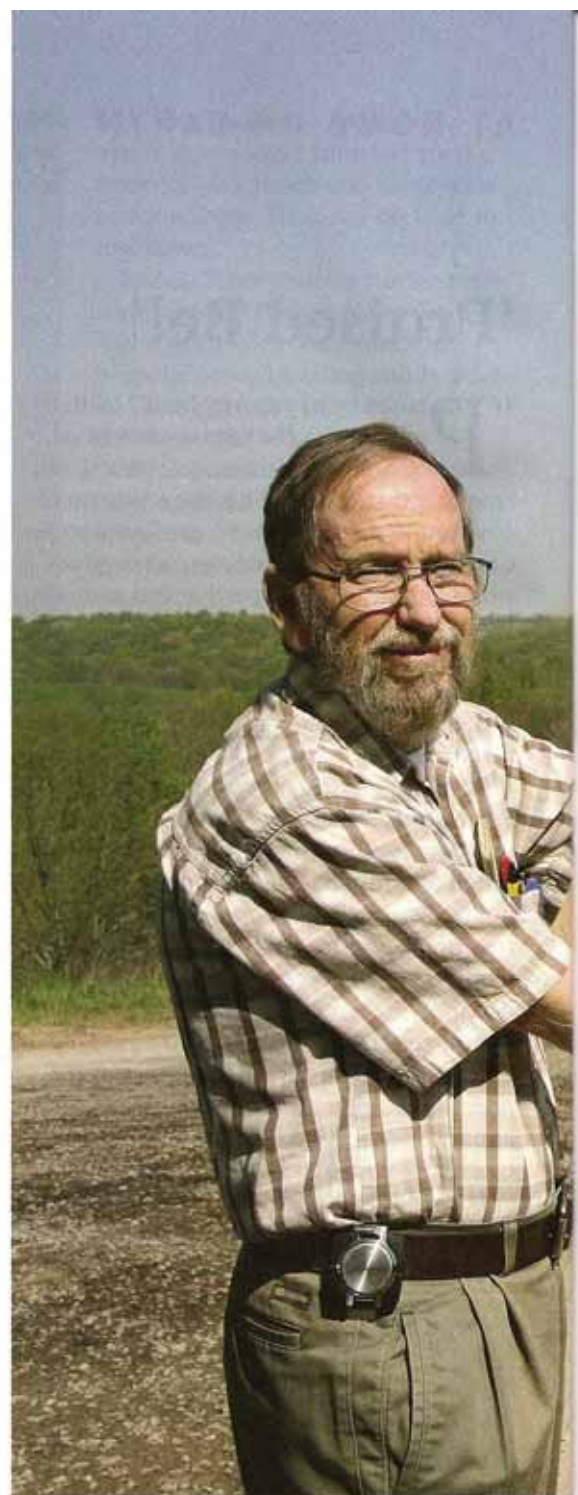
**T**HE TRAFFIC ON THE CB RADIO is sporadic as Bill Hughes drives along North Fork Road, not far from his home near New Martinsville, West Virginia. It's a sign on this bright late fall afternoon that few truckers are running drill cuttings to a landfill, or carrying water to and from the myriad of natural gas wells that span Wetzel County. Truck traffic usually is heavier on the narrow, curvy roads because of the natural gas mining boom that came to the state in 2007. Hughes knows the lull won't last long, though.

Near Mobley, he pulls his burgundy 2002 Blazer to the side of the road, opposite the object of his attention—a towering natural gas drilling rig, operated by Pittsburgh-based EQT Corporation. From this vantage point, Hughes has a clear view to watch the work going on a couple hundred feet away.

Hughes notices new activity at the rig's base. An excavator operator is filling an industrial-size dump truck with inky black drill cuttings. Hughes believes the cuttings are destined for a nearby landfill under a permit. He's not 100 percent certain, but he suspects the cuttings are from a horizontal shaft, and may even be radioactive.

He takes several photos. They eventually will find their way into a presentation about natural gas mining and the industrial process called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. People, he says, need to know what's going on in their backyards and the potential dangers fracking poses.

The retired industrial electrician and former Trappist monk has spent the last six years documenting the activity of the burgeoning natural gas industry that has turned quiet, rural communities across northern West Virginia into noisy and potentially toxic multiacre industrial zones. While Hughes, 70, works part-time for the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition and FracTracker Alliance, it's his commitment to his grandchildren's future and unwavering belief that God's creation must be protected that fuel his actions.



"All of this work is in an attempt to educate folks, and sort of harass the gas guys enough so that we might slow them down. As the Quakers say, 'See the God in everyone,'" he explains.

"I've done nothing but this for essentially six years, for my grandchildren. What are you going to leave for them? In 40 years, they're going to look back and say, 'How could you people have been so stupid to have allowed this?' We just need to keep that long-term view," says Hughes. "If I don't care about my



PHOTO BY TIM BISHOP

grandchildren's future, nobody does. If I don't take responsibility, no one else will."

### **At What Cost?**

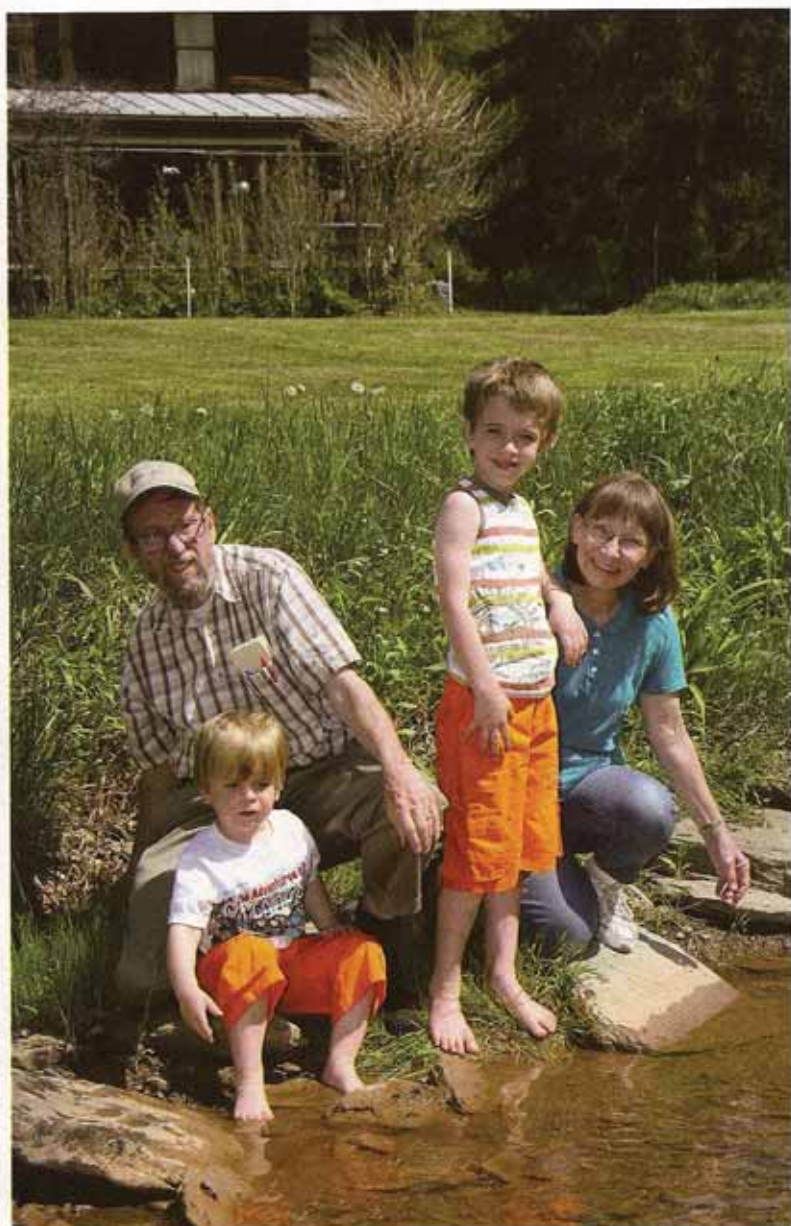
Hughes understands that most residents of Wetzel County welcome the jobs, the taxes, and the royalties fracking generates for landowners in an area struggling economically. "The flash of cash for most of these folks with mineral resources, it's hard to say no," he says, climbing into his SUV.

Americans have become too comfortable to

question how the low-cost gas that heats their home, cooks their food, and, increasingly, provides their electricity, is obtained, Hughes continues. He fears people do not understand the looming environmental dangers fracking poses: contamination of surface water and groundwater sources; polluted air from diesel exhaust; leakage of methane, a greenhouse gas that drives climate change; and earthquakes.

Technological advances in horizontal drilling since the 1990s have made it easier to access billions of cubic feet of natural gas in deep

Bill Hughes has spent the last six years documenting the process of fracking in rural communities in northern West Virginia. Here he takes photos of a fracking operation near his own home.



Hughes, seen here with his wife, Marianne, and two of their grandsons, says the work he does is for the sake of his grandchildren's future. Fracking can contaminate both surface water and groundwater, such as this creek by the Hugheses' house.

formations like the Marcellus Shale under West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Fracking requires millions of gallons of water, tons of sand, and a proprietary mix of chemicals. The mixture is pumped under tremendous pressure through a cement-encased borehole drilled a mile or more downward, and then horizontally as much as two miles, to fracture the shale. The sand holds open the fractures so the gas—and in some cases high-in-demand hydrocarbons like benzene, ethane, propane, and toluene—can flow to the surface.

Hughes, chairman of the Wetzel County Solid Waste Authority, often shares what he has learned from hours of research and visits to wells with local and state government officials to press them to limit natural gas extraction. He documents his findings with

photos—lots of photos—some taken from the single-seat airplane he occasionally flies over fracking sites.

An official for the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, however, says there is little to fear from fracking. Jason Harmon, deputy chief of the state's Office of Oil and Gas, says regulation of the natural gas industry was strengthened in 2011 when state legislators passed the Horizontal Well Control Act.

"Before that, we didn't have a lot," he says. "It was a brave new world."

### Too Close to Home

Such assurances do little to comfort Hughes and his wife of 45 years, Marianne. The Pittsburgh natives deeply love the land entrusted to their care since arriving in Wetzel County in 1981. Their property rests in a small valley along Scheidler Run, a shallow creek with crystal-clear water. Hughes calls it a "holy water supply."

Marianne, who plays the organ at Mass at tiny Mater Dolorosa Parish in Paden City, five miles south of New Martinsville, considers herself her husband's "support system." She works to keep him healthy so he can continue monitoring the wells, especially after liver cancer nearly claimed his life in 2011. "I came to the conclusion he's doing God's work, and that's the only reason he's alive. He doesn't quite go there with me, but I firmly believe that," she says.

The couple's home is not far from fracking operations. At times, the Hugheses can hear the jet engine-like roar of a well being flared, a process that burns off methane for days at a time to test gas quality. Hughes has documented chemical spills from wells that have reached some nearby waterways, but Scheidler Run has been spared.

"It's so important that we keep it that way," he says. "That's the challenge for the whole watershed."

According to an article published this past May in *The New York Times*, a study of drinking water from three homes in Bradford County, Pennsylvania, revealed traces of a compound commonly found in Marcellus Shale drilling fluids. The findings, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, addresses a long-standing question about potential risks to underground drinking water from fracking.

In the study, the researchers note that the contamination may have stemmed from a lack



of integrity in the drill wells and not from the actual fracking process far below.

### A Justice Issue

The Hugheses are part of a growing nationwide movement opposed to fracking. In Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, North Dakota, and elsewhere, Catholics have been inspired by the words of Pope Francis, Pope Benedict XVI—the “green pope”—and the Church’s social teaching to bear prophetic witness to environmental action on fracking.

The movement includes people like Kate Marshall, a member of St. Joseph Cathedral in Wheeling, West Virginia, who opened House of Hagar Catholic Worker in August. She is a leader in Wheeling Water Warriors, which formed in 2013 to stop Texas-based GreenHunter Resources from opening a fracking wastewater recycling facility near the Ohio River, in the city’s Warwood neighborhood. After processing the water, the company planned to discharge it into the river at a point 1.5 miles from the city’s water treatment intake pipes. The solid waste recovered would be barged down the river to landfills in Ohio.

Marshall and dozens of Warwood residents, including members of Corpus Christi Church there, objected. They maintained that they did not believe water used in fracking could be adequately treated and safely returned to the environment.

“From a Catholic position, and being



invested in Catholic social teaching, we were seeing so many rights violated. There was concern about care for creation and even rights for the workers,” says Marshall, 40, the mother of three teenagers: Gabby, 13, and twins Noah and Sam, 16.

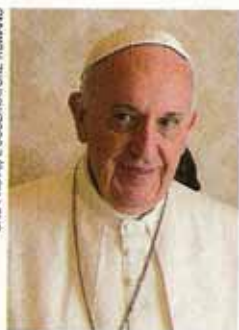
Although GreenHunter’s plan is on hold, Marshall and Wheeling Water Warriors have mobilized to protect the Ohio River from another danger, as West Virginia officials in December approved a plan to allow fracking under the river. They fear that chemically laden fracking fluids will migrate into the river.

On another front, two communities of women religious have acted to prohibit fracking on their land holdings. Through months of prayer and reflection, the Humility of Mary Sisters in Villa Maria, Pennsylvania, and the

(Top) The Ohio River could be affected by fracking, but not if Kate Marshall and the Wheeling Water Warriors have anything to say about it.

(Bottom) Sister Kathleen Durkin’s Congregation of St. Joseph in Wheeling decided in 2010 that fracking would not be allowed on its 100-acre Mount St. Joseph site. The decision, she says, was based in the congregation’s mission statement.

# Fracking and the Ecology Encyclical



CNS PHOTO/OSSERVATORE ROMANO

Opponents to fracking will be encouraged by the words of Pope Francis' landmark encyclical, "*Laudato Si'*": On Care for Our Common Home," published June 18. It opens with words from St. Francis of Assisi's "Canticle of the Creatures": "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us..." Then the pope lays out, in 180 pages, the Catholic understanding of creation,

proclaimed by Church teaching over the centuries.

The encyclical, a teaching of the highest authority, is a clarion call for all people to live responsibly on earth. Its overarching theme is "integral ecology," an acknowledgment that care for creation is connected to issues of justice, linking care for the environment and respect for all human beings.

Pope Francis speaks of "symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water," and says that "the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor."

Our sister, the earth, he says, "now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."

His radical call is that we move beyond "highly polluting fossil fuels . . . without delay." Calling the postindustrial period as perhaps "the most irresponsible in history," he at the same time offers hope that humanity today might be remembered for "having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities."

Congregation of St. Joseph in Wheeling, decided that their properties would be off-limits to fracking, even though they sit atop rich natural gas deposits.

St. Joseph Sister Kathleen Durkin says it took her congregation several months to learn about fracking before deciding, in 2010, to disallow it on its 100-acre Mount St. Joseph

site. The congregation's decision was rooted in the "generous promises" spelled out in its mission statement.

There are four promises, and one specifically cites the environment. It invites members to "recognize the reality that Earth is dying, to claim our oneness with Earth, and to take steps now to strengthen, heal, and renew the face of the Earth."

"If you look at those generous promises, it's all about inclusion and systemic change," Sister Kathleen says. "So how could we not take seriously the implications? As far as we could see at that time, the implications are the use of the water, the chemicals, the air, our neighbors."

"It's sort of like we decide to drill, but what about our neighbors down the street? It's that mission context, how our own vision of what it means that all may be one, that whole sense of the oneness that we all share in God, in creation, and how those choices affect now and the future."

## Faith-Based Activism

Other concerns related to fracking have emerged elsewhere.

In eastern Pennsylvania, Tom Lyons has focused his efforts on preventing an expansion of Williams Corporation's Transco pipeline, known as the Atlantic Sunrise Project. As proposed, the 178-mile pipeline would bring natural gas from Marcellus Shale formations in northeastern Pennsylvania to markets in the mid-Atlantic and southeastern United States.

At first, Lyons, a member of St. Columba Parish in Bloomsburg, knew little about fracking or the project. Before long, he knew enough that he wanted to stop the project. He acted, he says, because of his renewed Catholic faith and the inspiration of his uncle, the late Father John Hugo, a well-known retreat leader in Pittsburgh.

"I believe this is the biggest rape of humanity ever perpetuated by humankind," Lyons says of fracking. "It's a tsunami. It's real. We have pictures of a tsunami. The water's backing out to the sea right now and it's coming. I felt I have a responsibility as a Christian to do what I can. That's all I can do, is just as much as I can."

Lyons, 66, who retired as financial aid director at Bloomsburg University in 2010 after 34 years with the school, has spent hours going door-to-door talking to residents along the pipeline route and inviting them to community meetings to learn more. His 62-acre prop-

erty is not in the project's path, but he says he wants to alert others about the environmental dangers of pipelines and compressor stations, primarily, because of leaks.

Nearly 1,000 miles away in Bloomer, Wisconsin, Ken Schmitt, a farmer who raises grass-fed cattle for beef, followed a similar path to faith-based environmental activism. The member of St. John the Baptist Church, north of Eau Claire, has spent seven years raising awareness about the serious health problems posed by frac sand mining. Hydraulic fracturing requires the fine quartz sand that is readily found in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri.

Like fracking, frac sand mining introduces an industrial process to rural communities. What's more, sand particles—crystalline silica—can be carried by the wind to nearby residences, schools, and farms. It is the silica that concerns Schmitt most.

Specifically, the tiniest particles—those less than 10 microns (10 millionths of a meter) in size—pose the greatest concern, because size determines where in the respiratory tract the silica is deposited. Larger particles usually end up in upper parts of the respiratory system and can be more easily pushed out of the body.

Tinier particles can be inhaled deep into the lungs and cannot be expelled. The American Lung Association says prolonged silica exposure can cause breathing and respiratory problems, irritation, and inflammation, and can lead to silicosis, a lung disease. It can take years for symptoms to develop. There is no cure.

"Silicosis is about exposure over time. Exposure over time is what gets you," Schmitt says.

Schmitt, 49, and his family—wife, Laura, and children Allison, 10; Amy, 8; Elizabeth, 6; and Timmy, 4—live about a half mile from one mine and two miles from another. Moving is not an option, he says.

"I've said many times, if me or my wife get sick in 20 or 30 years, we'll be 70 or 80 years old, and at the end of our lives. But if my kids get it, they will be in their 30s or 40s. That's a tragedy. It's incurable, and there's not much you can do for it."

Schmitt admits that the time spent circulating petitions, attending local health board meetings, and traveling

to the state capital in Madison to push for standards on frac sand exposure stresses family life. But he also does not want to let the industry go about business without taking responsibility.

"Society doesn't work unless people take a more proactive role sometimes, and move beyond your sphere of influence," he says. "People tend not to take a stance. They're busy and what have you. They tend not to take a look at what's right and what's wrong, when they should be weighing in."

Then he asks: "What are we leaving for future generations? It's not going to be a real good end production in reclamation. I think they can get some grass to grow, but it's not going to be what it was, and it will leave an impact on the land. I always believed as a farmer it should be better when you leave it than when you started working on it." ☒

Dennis Sadowski is a staff writer for Catholic News Service. He enjoys exploring the work of people of faith in the pursuit of social justice.

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