

Fracking the Farm

Part 3: Impacts on Marketing and Food Safety

—Sue Smith-Heavenrich

This is the third of a three-part series of articles concerning the possible impacts of industrialized shale gas drilling on New York's foodshed.

On an August Sunday in 2009, Angel and Wayne Smith were relaxing on their porch after finishing the farm chores. Suddenly they heard an explosion.

"It sounded like a jet engine blew up," said Angel. "And then we heard something like rain hitting the tin roof. But there wasn't a cloud in the sky."

The explosion was Spectra Energy's Steckman Ridge gas compressor station, located half a mile from the Smith's farm. The pattering droplets they heard was 1,629 pounds of used gear-lubricating oil turned into an aerosol mist by the explosion. Oil wasn't the only thing released that day; more than 6,400 pounds of methane and volatile organic compounds were also sprayed into the air. The oily mist settled on gardens, cars, and hayfields up to one and a half miles from the compressor plant.

The Smiths and their neighbors were told to not eat any vegetables or fruit from their gardens and to throw away toys that had been exposed. "But the oil covered everything," said Angel Smith, "our house, garage, the hay wagons ... we lost all our tomatoes and our berry crop."

The gear oil mist landed on the Smiths' beef cattle. It coated the tarp covering their winter hay supply and contaminated the exposed parts of bales. The oil landed on the corn, the pastures, and the hayfields. "We ended up cutting it and leaving it in the field," says Angel Smith. She estimates they lost well over \$25,000 in crops and hay; Wayne pegs the figure closer to \$40,000. Then there are the additional expenses they've incurred to protect their livestock and harvest: a new shed to store hay (\$22,000) and more than \$4,000 in water tests. The problem, she says, is that they don't know what they should be testing for.

But nothing they do has been able to save their once-thriving U-pick blueberry operation. Before the compressor accident, they could count on a steady flow of ten families a day, each hauling out five gallons or more of berries. But now, even after three years, only a handful of people drop by.

"We've got 550 plants and no one wants to pick berries," says Angel Smith. She can't fault people for being worried about contamination from the compressor and the surrounding gas wells. "At least the beef go to auction," she says, noting that no one has ever questioned the safety of her beef.

What's the Beef?

While some buyers bid for beef raised in gas country, others have made no bones about boycotting food grown near wells. Two years ago the Park Slope Food Co-op publicly stated that if hydrofracking were allowed in New York, they would "research alternatives to New York state products." The 15,800-member retail food cooperative purchases more than \$1.5 million in New York state

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fruits and vegetables and another \$1 million in poultry, beef, lamb, and pork. They also purchase NY-made yogurt, cheese, eggs, cider, and milk and take their responsibility to “buy local” seriously.

Fracking—even if it weren’t on the producer’s farm—would be a deal-breaker. One that, says NOFA-NY member Ken Jaffe, would have a dramatic effect on his farm.

Jaffe raises grass-fed beef on hilly pastures in the Western Catskills. Slope Farm is situated on 100 acres in Delaware County, located near the headwaters of the Susquehanna River and just outside the “no fracking” buffer zone protecting the New York City watershed. He leases another 300 acres of pastures and hayfields and contracts grazing with other farmers. Some of his beef ends up at the Park Slope Co-op and other NYC markets, so Jaffe takes extra care to ensure his cattle are raised well away from drilling areas. But what happens when drilling moves into an area?

That’s not a rhetorical question for Jaffe. Just a few months ago he began negotiating a two-year grazing contract with a Tioga County farmer. But at the end of September, Houston-based Carrizo Oil and Gas started drilling an exploratory Marcellus well in Owego. Now Jaffe’s rethinking that contract, especially since Governor Andrew Cuomo has indicated he’d allow horizontal hydrofracking in Tioga and other Southern Tier counties.



Two new drilling sites disrupt the rural landscape in this scene of Bradford County, PA. Photo by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

There’s a lack of knowledge about what kinds of toxic substances concentrate in the various organs and body parts after exposure.

“There is no effort to do that kind of investigation,” Jaffe says, “and it’s exactly the sort of study we need.” Michelle Bamberger and Robert Oswald agree. The research team has spent the past two years collecting case studies of drilling impacts on animals.

Out of ten herds exposed to drilling chemical and wastewater spills, only one was quarantined—that dairy herd in PA. And that, says Bamberger, is because state investigators found strontium in their tests. “Farmers are continuing to produce food products (milk and meat) without testing.”

The proximity of gas drilling chemicals and waste fluids to food production raises questions about the safety of grain and vegetables as well as the meat, eggs, and dairy products. Bamberger also questions the safety of producing poultry feed from rendered flesh of animals exposed to drilling fluids.

“The biggest problem is that we don’t know enough,” she says. Not only is there no federal funding for research on the impacts of chemical contamination on food, there are also no required tests for contaminants. There are no mandatory “hold times” or quarantines for animals exposed to drilling chemicals either, says Bamberger.

Break Bread, Not Shale

Testing won’t make much difference, though, if there’s a perception that food comes from a contaminated place. And place is important, says Stefan Senders. The number of organic farms in New York State is growing, he notes, and that trend is helping to spur the growth of local economies.

Almost two years ago he started Wide Awake Bakery, a tiny bakery located in Mecklenburg, just



On this Butler County, PA, farm, organically grown corn surrounds newly “planted” storage tanks for drilling fluids. Photo courtesy of Michelle Bamberger

Testing, Testing...

The primary concern for Jaffe’s buyers is what’s in the meat. “No one at the regulatory level is investigating this,” he says, disbelief in his voice. He cites the Pennsylvania case where 28 cows were quarantined after exposure to drilling fluids. “And then what?” he asks. No one, to his knowledge, has looked for any chemical residues in those animals.



From the air, the industrial nature of gas drilling is easy to see.
Photo by Sue Smith-Heavenrich



Clouds hang over the Lathrop compressor station in Susquehanna County, PA, after the compressor exploded in March 2012. *Photo by Frank Finan*

west of Ithaca. Production is small—between 500 to 700 loaves a week—but the focus, Senders says, is to nurture a local economy. One neighbor grows the organic grains, another neighbor mills them, and Senders bakes them into wholesome loaves.

“The wheat, the flour, and the bread are wholesome,” says Senders. “They bring our communities together, give us work, nourish us, and make our bodies and our land healthier.” Fracking threatens that.

“Because bread needs water,” Senders explains, “lots of water.” Bread works because of gluten, and gluten works because you wet the flour. His rye

flour requires nearly equal proportions of water and flour, and the purity of that water is critical. “What happens if you put your second ingredient at risk?”

Should drilling contaminate local wells, Senders could truck in water. But no farmer can afford to truck in irrigation water, he says. And without local grain, what’s a miller to grind? The illusion, says Senders is that you only need to fix one thing—such as bringing in water. “But when you frack, eventually everything fractures.”

Agriculture and environmental journalist Sue Smith-Heavenrich has written about the potential impacts of gas drilling on livestock and crops.

What's in a Jar of Once Again?

Miso-Honey Glazed Salmon

- 6 salmon portions, 6 oz. each
- 1/4 cup *Once Again Killer Bee Organic Honey**
- 1/4 cup white miso paste
- 2 tbsp fresh orange juice
- 1 tbsp rice vinegar
- 2 tsp soy sauce

Dairy Free

Preheat the broiler. The rack should be in the middle of the oven so the salmon is about 6-8 inches away from the heat while cooking. Whisk together the honey, miso paste, orange juice, soy sauce and rice vinegar. Place the salmon in a broiler-safe dish. Cover well with the glaze. Roast the salmon under the broiler for 10-12 minutes, until the salmon is cooked through and the glaze is lightly caramelized. Use a pastry brush to baste the salmon with the reduced glaze from the bottom of the dish about halfway through cooking. Remove from the oven and serve immediately. Serves 6. Enjoy!

*make this recipe with any of our delicious honey varieties!

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