MEDIA RELEASE

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Fracking vs. Health Forums Draw Large Crowds

Three Southern Tier events, in Bath, Spencer, and Elmira, highlight true stories from those sickened by Pennsylvania fracking, medical and legal issues.

“I’m a canary in a coal mine, that’s what people tell me,” said Joe Giovannini, from Washington County, Pennsylvania. Giovannini, along with a former gas field worker, a medical doctor, and an attorney working on drilling-related issues, spoke to gatherings in Bath, Spencer, and Elmira over the weekend in three public “Fracking vs. Health” forums.

“I’ve been diagnosed with stage four cancer, and now there are lesions on my brain, thyroid and liver,” said the third-generation stonemason. This could happen to you if you let the gas drilling industry into your beautiful state.”

Giovannini’s ailments likely stemmed from his exposure over several years to contaminated water in his home’s water well. In 2006 an unconventional gas well was drilled and fracked just 391 feet from his house, and later a refinery operation was built 1/8 mile away. He began being plagued by a series of mysterious ailments — joint pain, lesions, rashes, dizziness, breathing difficulties.

He visited numerous doctors and specialists. “Nobody could or would tell me what was wrong with me,” he said. “And these are people who are trained for years to diagnose people.”

His dog got sick, too, losing clumps of fur and acting lethargic.

Suspecting contaminated water, Giovannini began buying water in five-gallon jugs, which he used to cook, bathe, drink, and flush the commode. But his health didn’t improve. He was still short of breath. He lost energy. His feet and legs began turning blue and purple.

“I was forced to evacuate the house my father and I built together 35 years ago,” he said.

When he moved away, within a few weeks he was feeling much better. But then he decided to move home, and soon began having worse symptoms.

On January 7 of this year, he “woke up in an ambulance. I’d had a seizure.” He spent three weeks in the hospital.

Finally, his family doctor ran tests that led to the diagnosis of lung and brain cancer. Giovannini is certain that fracking is to blame.
Former Gas Field Workers Now Sick

Fellow Pennsylvanian Mac Sawyer came to the same conclusion, via a much different route. “I used to breathe, drink, and eat natural gas,” he told the Spencer audience. “I loved it. I worked 70, 80, sometimes 120 hours a week” as a truck driver for the industry. He hauled flowback and fresh water, drilling mud and production water. Later he was promoted to a supervisor in the Environmental Division for Fluids Control and Flow Back. He worked for several corporations, including Chief Oil and Gas, Chesapeake Energy, Exco Energy, Chevron, Nabors, and Anadarko Petroleum.

Among his duties were cleaning up containment areas and maintaining the area around frack tanks.

“You can’t believe what goes on,” he told the audiences. “These guys just cover up spills and all sorts of things. Once after we’d worked a 17-hour shift, we had to drive two hours to get a hotel room. I wasn’t asleep 45 minutes when I got a phone call saying get back there right away, there was a big spill. When we got back, the boss puts his arm around me and says, ‘Hey, don’t worry about it, we covered it up.’”

That was the last straw for Sawyer. He quit.

“I would have just walked away and never said a word,” he admitted. “But they fought me on unemployment.”

By then his own health was going downhill. “All sorts of things are wrong with me,” he said. “I got swelling, horrible pain in my spine, rashes, my skin burns, I’m dizzy, I have trouble breathing, I can’t sleep, I get headaches like you wouldn’t believe. My joints hurt, I get nose bleeds.”

Ellen Harrison, an audience member in Spencer, asked how many of the men he worked with are also sick.

“I’d say of the 52 guys I worked with, probably half, maybe 30 of them are sick,” Sawyer responded.

Another audience member asked, “What happens when they get sick?”

“They just throw you out,” replied Sawyer.

Sawyer’s friend Randy Moyer had been scheduled to speak on the forums as well, but was too sick to travel.

“Randy’s in a really bad way,” Sawyer said, choking up. “He’s so sick. They had him cleaning out the frack trucks without any protective gear. Other guys are just wearing a paper jumpsuit, a hardhat, no mask, essentially no protection. They send you in tethered to a rope, and if you pass out, someone hauls you out.”

In a follow-up phone call today Sawyer said: “They took Randy directly from the rig to the hospital after he had been exposed for many hours inside those tanks. He was in obvious pain. The company never gave us training on the dangers, we were never certified and we were given the answers to a test that masqueraded as training.”
Medical and Legal Experts Testify

Following the Pennsylvania men’s presentation, Dr. Larysa Dyrszka, a board certified pediatrician who has become a prominent advocate for public health surrounding unconventional gas drilling, spoke. Her presentation focused on the myriad health dangers of the energy, not only to workers but to the public.

Dr. Dyrszka focused on the radioactive materials, endocrine disruptors, neurotoxins, and carcinogens in drill cuttings and waste fluid, pointing out that Pennsylvania has so far drilled only several thousand wells, with some 150,000 planned for the future.

“Without a comprehensive health impact assessment,” she said, “we can’t know what to expect.” It is foolhardy to permit fracking without such an assessment, she concluded.

Lauren Williams, an attorney with Curtin & Heefner LLP, represents individuals, community and environmental groups, and municipalities with environmental and land use issues, including those related to shale gas exploitation.

Williams discussed Pennsylvania Act 13 of 2012, which took away the right of municipalities to use zoning ordinances to protect themselves from industrial harms of shale-gas operations.

The law also effectively “gagged” doctors and other health care providers, forcing those treating suspected poison patients to request in writing from the gas companies a list of the chemicals used in the vicinity. The corporation can refuse to divulge the information, claiming “proprietary trade secrets.” Should the corporation decide to reveal the information to the doctor, the doctor is required to keep it secret — even from the patient and the doctor in the next room treating a similarly stricken person.

Williams is part of a legal team challenging the constitutionality of the law. In July the Commonwealth Court struck down portions of it, and in October it ruled in favor of municipalities. An appeal is now pending in Pennsylvania Supreme Court. But the gag order on doctors remains.

The Takeaway

Lively question-and-answer sessions followed in each of the three forums. People were shocked at what they’d learned.

“It’s very frightening,” said Ellen Harrison, founder of (F)Leased, a group formed to help those who leased their land to drillers and now regret it, “that people who leased or live near sites have the most to lose. They’re likeliest to suffer with health problems.”

Paula Kaartinen, a founding member of Save S-VE and RAFT (Residents Against Fracking Tioga), which cosponsored the Spencer forum along with Coalition to Protect New York, Committee to Preserve the Finger Lakes, and People for a Healthy Environment, Inc., was also struck by the immediacy of the threat.

“We Americans think we’re exempt from being treated badly by corporations. We think our government’s going to take care of us,” she said. “But every speaker — the men, the doctor,
the lawyer — all spoke to the secrecy, the corruption. When there’s a spill, workers are told, ‘This never happened,’ and ‘It’ll be all right.’

“They allow the workers to do things without protection,” she added. “Americans have this vanity where we think nobody will treat us badly — they’ll do it in South Africa or somewhere far away, but not here. Well, we can see that’s not true.”

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