

Marcellus Shale gas: A blessing or curse?

Upstate farmers eye cash for drilling, fear water pollution, loss of workers.

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A natural gas drill sits atop a ridge near Knoxville, Pa.

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he has in the area. Kroeck does work on at least 30 farms, which he either rents or owns outright.

But the sale, he said, benefits him, and he has gotten a nice payment out of it. As for not collecting royalties on the well, he thinks he'll get another chance down the road.

"I'm a happy camper. I just wanted to split the risk," he said.

For the Coolidge family outside of Wellsboro, natural gas drilling has been a mixed blessing.

The family farms 696 acres and milks 250 head of Holsteins.

They have a lease that pays them only \$20 an acre from East Resources. They signed the lease 10 years ago, so they got in long before the price of leasing land exploded with some property owners receiving up to \$5,000 an acre from the gas companies.

This summer, the company drilled a well on the farm. It took out a large chunk of land, and an access road had to be put in to reach the well.

Derrick Coolidge, fifth generation farmer, can't complain about the money from the lease.

"The check was, and it still is, nice," he said while on a combine harvesting corn for silage. "I think sometimes, why would you want to get out when you have extra money to do your thing."

Now the waiting game begins for the family to collect a royalty from their well.

Derrick looks forward to the money to make improvements on the farm and, by the expression in his voice, that money is essential.

"It's a concern right now, because we're not getting money. But later, it might not be," he said.

His mother, Dixie, who has seen the ups and downs of the dairy business, worries about the impact the natural gas business will have on dairying and whether or not dairy farmers, who constantly struggle, will just sell out.

"I question how many farmers will be left around here. Will they be wanting to farm anymore? I don't know," she said.

Dixie has mixed feelings about the drilling on her farm.

For one thing, it has taken land out of farming.

"It's hard to see what it did to the fields," she said. The booming gas business has impacted other farming-related businesses.

In their situation, the family found it hard to find excavators to construct a new manure storage facility on the farm because, according to Dixie, many of them are too busy doing work for the gas companies.

When they did hire an excavator, the price was higher than expected. Dixie said the family ended up shelling out more money because it exceeded the amount of money they got through the cost share program EQIP, Environmental Quality Incentives Program. The program can pay up to 75 percent of a project's cost, but only up to a certain level.

"There is good and bad. We're still trying to stay in dairy, and we hope other farms will stay in, but who knows," she said.

As he drives his pickup truck through the sleepy town of Knoxville, farmer Karl Kroeck is well aware of the potential impact nearby natural gas drills could have on the area's depressed economy.

"If it weren't for the bank, there would be nothing here," Kroeck laments. "This area needs the money."

Across the Marcellus Shale region of western and northern Pennsylvania, landowners have been wondering when the gas companies would arrive.

In northern Tioga County, where Kroeck lives, the gas companies are making their presence felt.

Land is being cleared to make room for gas pads, most of them around five acres in size. Large drills have become commonplace in this pristine landscape of rolling hills and nature as companies vie for their part of what is believed to be one of the largest natural gas fields in the country.

For the many farmers in the area, the prospect of collecting a royalty from a natural gas well is exciting.

But for others, there is a real fear that the side effects of natural gas drilling — from polluted water wells to potentially good paying jobs that will take workers away from farms — will outweigh the benefits.

For Kroeck, who recently sold his 200 head of dairy cattle and has decided to retire from dairy farming after 41 years, natural gas could be a potential boon.

A pad sits on property he sold this past summer. There is no drill on the pad yet.

He sold his land, along with the gas rights, so he could focus on other farms

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