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## Marcellus shale series: Gas drilling ignites boom in Pennsylvania community

A rural county is learning some hard lessons amid tremendous growth spurred by the prospect of a natural gas bonanza. What happens there could have an impact throughout the state.

By Darrin Youker  
Reading Eagle

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### SUGAR RUN -

Five years ago, Kevin Potter was having a tough time on the farm.

He, like many dairy farmers in rural Bradford County, was riding the roller coaster of milk prices and trying to stay one step ahead of the taxes and bills.

So when a landman from a natural gas company offered Potter \$40 an acre to lease his land, Potter signed up, paid off the fertilizer bill and went right back to farming.

There was a promise of lucrative royalty payments, but those have not materialized. While a gas company has drilled one well on Potter's land and prepared for a second, no gas is being produced.

### WATCH: Marcellus shale drilling

Potter and other landowners here are taking a wait-and-see approach to the burgeoning natural gas industry in Bradford County. Drilling has transformed the landscape of this Northern Tier county, with more than 20 drilling rigs going at one time, gas company trucks swarming the main roads and workers renting out hotels en masse.

Bradford County could become a litmus test for the state.

The county, like much of northern and central Pennsylvania, sits atop the Marcellus shale formation, a giant, untapped source of natural gas. Given the size and scope of Pennsylvania's natural gas reserves, and the interest that energy companies have shown in the state, experts predict drilling may cast a big influence for years to come.

"We are literally the Saudi Arabia of natural gas," said Jan Jarret, president of PennFuture, a statewide environmental group.

Natural gas companies say the rich reserve of gas already is providing new jobs, generating royalty payments for landowners and providing an economic salve to communities hard hit by the recession.

Pennsylvania has, in part, tied its fiscal fortune to the gas industry. To balance the budget, Pennsylvania lawmakers are pushing for a severance tax, anticipating \$140 million this fiscal year.

At the same time, the gas recovery process is controversial. The process of extracting the gas, known as fracking, requires millions of gallons of water along with chemicals to break apart rocks.

And, in places such as Bradford, the state Department of Environmental Protection is exploring whether drilling is causing methane to migrate to drinking wells.

Bradford is going through growing pains right now. The influx of workers has overtaxed available short-term housing, causing a spike in rental prices. Traffic, by most accounts, is horrendous.

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Reading Eagle: Ryan McFadden  
**Kenneth Owlett, left, and David Wiley watch gas drillers at work on land neighboring their properties in Bradford County. Many farmers in the rural area have sold rights to their land to energy companies.**

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Yet Bradford led all Pennsylvania counties in job growth last quarter and has seen more subdivision plans. And the real estate market is doing just fine.

"This touches every fabric of our community," said Mark W. Smith, president of the Bradford County commissioners.

### Land rush

The first hint that something was up was about two years ago.

On any given workday, more than 75 people crowded around folding tables clustered in the Bradford County office building, poring over leases and land records. The ladies at the recorder of deeds office were overwhelmed, said Shirley Rockefeller, register and recorder of Bradford.

To help understand where Bradford was heading, Smith and the two other county commissioners traveled to Texas, where gas companies have been using similar technology to harvest gas in communities outside Dallas.

"It helped all of us grasp the intensity of natural gas drilling," he said of the Texas trip. "Everywhere you look, you see gas wells."

Drilling has brought new economic vigor to Bradford. Two hotels are being built in Towanda, progress that would have been unheard of five years ago.

"It gives you hope for people here who are struggling," Smith said.

Take Tammy Harkness, owner of Harkness Family Restaurant, just outside Towanda. Business was steady before the gas rush, but Harkness has had to hire new waitresses and cooks to catch up with increased demand.

At the request of drilling companies, Harkness opens her restaurant at 4 a.m. to serve more than 75 workers at a time, and then does the same thing 12 hours later.

Or take Gary Wilcox, who along with his wife, Cindy, owns C&G Wilcox Engravings & Images. They started selling drilling-themed jewelry, a hot seller among gas workers.

"For some reason, they can't get these out in Texas and Oklahoma," Gary said, holding a pendant in the shape of a drilling bit.

But with the boom comes problems.

On a recent afternoon, the county's human services agency was dealing with 13 children who were left homeless because their families couldn't afford a place to live, Smith said.

Most Bradford municipalities have no zoning, but some communities are looking at new laws as development begins to change the landscape, said Raymond J. Stolinis Jr, county planning director.

While the workload in the planning office has increased, with mapping requests and reviews of development plans, budget constraints have prevented the county from adding to the four-person staff, he said.

Such problems prove that communities affected by drilling need to receive a portion of any taxation on gas extraction, Smith said.

Pennsylvania should have learned how drilling impacted other states, such as Colorado and Wyoming, and better planned for it, he said.

"We seem to be destined in Pennsylvania to make the same mistakes, and then learn from them," Smith said.

### On the farm

Down along an oxbow in the Susquehanna River, Kevin Potter farms the bottom lands, pulling hay and corn off the fields. Those fields lay atop a river of natural gas, one that might pay dividends for Potter and other landowners.

For now, he waits.

While Potter was told by a landman that leases would never go above \$40 an acre, he's seen other landowners sign up for \$5,000 an acre. Last fall a well site was prepared, but never drilled, on a 10-acre hay field that now sits unusable.

"They tied up my land, but they haven't drilled yet," he said. "Maybe my mind will change when my first royalty check comes."

It's on the farms that drilling gets personal. Land is leased for drilling. Roads are constructed, water is trucked in, and for about eight weeks, a farmer's property becomes an industrial site with round-the-clock drilling and workers coming and going.

And it's on the farms that landowners could get rich from royalty checks.

Therein lies the blessing, and the burden.

Mark Madden, a Penn State Extension educator and Bradford County native, has seen the good the industry has brought to his hometown. But he worries Bradford might not be able to preserve its culture if drilling takes off.

"We are a rural, agriculture community, and as they say, millionaires don't milk cows," Madden said. "I would fear that the backbone of our region would change."

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