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## Preserved farms protected from development but not gas drilling

BY LAURA LEGERE (STAFF WRITER)

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An exploratory natural gas well planned for Benton Twp. will be drilled on a handful of the 3,700 acres of farmland in Lackawanna County that have been preserved forever from development through state- and county-owned conservation easements.

Oil and gas exploration has been allowed on farms conserved through the state Bureau of Farmland Preservation's easement purchase program since it was developed in 1988.

The program aims to slow the conversion of prime farmland to nonagricultural uses, like housing developments, by buying development rights from farmers, but gas drilling was never seen as an incompatible use of the land.

The advent of Marcellus Shale drilling, with its larger well pads and longer operations than conventional shallow drilling, has brought more attention to the issue especially in parts of the state, like the northeast, that rarely saw gas drilling before.

"Obviously, Marcellus Shale presents a tremendous opportunity for farm owners to reinvest in their farm operations and pay down debt and maybe diversify the type of agriculture they're doing," said Doug Wolfgang, director of the Farmland Preservation Bureau. "That said, it's all about balancing the need for domestic energy with the preservation of our natural resources and our farmlands."

In Benton, Southwestern Energy Production Co. plans to build a pad and access road on about 3.5 acres of idle pasture on a 175-acre farm owned by Willard and Sally Wells. About 115 of the acres are covered by an agricultural easement.

The Wells preserved their farm in 2002 and were paid \$178,000 for the easement, according to Lackawanna County property records.

They signed a gas lease in 2007, but never expected to see drilling on their farm.

Mr. Wells said he is confident Southwestern will protect the property and plans to do his part - "they'll probably think I'm looking over their shoulder all the time," he said - to make sure the driller treats the farm well.

"The land has to be put back the way it is now when they're done," he said. "Otherwise I wouldn't have gone into this."

During a conditional use hearing about the planned well in January, Southwestern's Pennsylvania operations manager Dave Sweeley said he was not aware that there is an agricultural easement on the property.

Ellie Hyde, the administrator of Lackawanna County's Agricultural Land Preservation Program, said most of the 41 conserved farms in the county's program have also been leased for gas drilling.

She worries about compaction of the soil from the weight of the gas drilling equipment that will be brought to the site, but there are few prohibitions set by the easements on what the gas companies can do on preserved farms. Gas wells, pipelines and associated facilities are all allowed under the easements.

"We caution farmers to discuss it with the gas drillers," she said, "and try not to use land that's currently being used for agriculture and make sure it's put back the way it was when it's done."

Contact the writer: [llegere@timeshamrock.com](mailto:llegere@timeshamrock.com)

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 **Pickles1982** 2 days ago

They never expected to see drilling?

I hope all of these farmers are happy. I see many homes for sale in Newton Ransom that are surrounded by leased property. Good luck selling a house when there is the possibility of contaminated water!


I hope they enjoy their money.

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 **JimBarth** 2 days ago

Shale gas extraction is an under regulated, hugely subsidized, inherently polluting, heavy, industry that has nothing to do with farming, or preserving the land. This is yet another example of a loophole the size of the state of Texas, that Pennsylvania permits. If the land and water get contaminated, what good is an open vista? What crops can one plant over pipelines, next to compressors, in contaminated soil?

The fact that PA paid these farmers with our tax dollars for the purpose of preserving the open farmland, then, allowed the same farmers to lease for shale gas extraction on that same property, is a betrayal.

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 **Mary Sweeney** 1 day ago

The idea that the land can be "put back the way it is now" is extremely naive. The issue of soil compaction is mentioned in the article, but it is just one of many issues to be considered. For example, if there are chemical spills that seep into the soil and water, what will it take to restore the land? If there is methane bubbling out of the ground how do you fix that? If the farm's ponds are polluted, how do you fix that? If the farm's water wells are polluted, how do fix that?

Also, how long will the gas well(s) be in operation--10 years, 20 years, 30 years??? During that time period, the land most definitely will not be the same as it is now, even if no accidents occur. And who knows what financial shape some of these gas companies will be in 20 years from now or if they will even be around to fulfill their obligations to attempt to restore the land? If the gas companies are no longer around, or if they try to deny that they are responsible for the destruction of the land, the taxpayers will be asked to come up with the cash needed to attempt to restore the land.

Personally, I think that farmers who want to drill should be required to return the money they received for preservation easements, or perhaps the money should be put in escrow until the land has been returned to its original state, provided such a thing is even possible. Land preservation and shale gas extraction are not compatible.

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I find it ironic how people trash the drilling industry but then go right ahead and turn on their gas fireplace or turn up the heat in the natural gas powered furnaces.

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"... it's all about balancing the need for domestic energy with the preservation of our natural resources and our farmlands." Read that statement again, it makes so much sense. Remember that the reason why there is a gas industry is that people like Jim Barth want to use the gas, just not see it being drilled. His mantra is "Think locally, act globally."

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All farm land that is farmed undergoes compaction on a regular basis. A grown dairy or beef cow compacts soil. A 9 ton tractor with a six ton implement runs over the entire surface of a field causes compaction. Tillage equipment and mother nature (frost) reduce the compaction as well as root systems and crop rotations. Wake up Jim and Mary and open your eyes to the real world. Eat roots and live in a cave for gods sake! I pray you dont have children that love this country and will be found dead in the middle east appeasing you!

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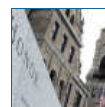
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