

DECEMBER 2015

“Game Changer”: The Big Bust Continues

NEW YORK: In 2008, the US Government invested billions of dollars to restore liquidity to the nation’s financial systems. But, in 2015 alone, the oil and gas industry has destroyed over \$20 billion in capital through just one investment vehicle: its “master limited partnerships” (MLPs).

That’s the bottom line of a new [report](#) from Associated Press, which estimates that 80% of the money put into these MLPs is probably gone for good. And while law firms are gearing up for class-action [suits](#), drilling companies now say they never hid the “risky” nature of their favorite cash-raising scheme.

A big beneficiary of MLPs is Chesapeake Energy, whose former CEO (Aubrey McClendon) resigned two years ago. In a recent interview, the new boss claims that, when he arrived, more than half of the deals on Chesapeake’s books were clear losers. The company is now shedding assets to raise the cash to keep going.

And, although Chesapeake has been the poster child for high-flying and hubris in the fracking industry, financial distress is everywhere. Many drilling companies are declaring a long, unpaid “holiday” for their workers, from Thanksgiving until at least New Years Day.

Noble Energy (which operates joint ventures locally with Consol Energy) announced a second round of layoffs, and cancelled a public offering for new investments in Colorado. Magnum Hunter (active in Marcellus and Utica drilling in Ohio and West Virginia) has suspended operations, and faces delisting from the New York Stock Exchange after announcing that it may be “unable to continue as a going concern.”

Range Resources posted a quarterly loss in its latest financials, and—like many Marcellus operators—has seen its share price fall 50% in just the past six months. Range is selling precious leaseholdings to raise the cash it needs to keep drilling in the Marcellus. (Bravely, the company calls this action “bringing the value forward.”)

Nor have service companies been spared: Bursleson LLP, one of the region’s largest law firms, is [closing](#) entirely, after opening a local office to serve gas operators here. Almost 40 lawyers, plus support staff will be gone.



Another “F word”: Faith and Fracking

“Anti-fracking People of Faith” might seem like a contradiction. Organized religion — in particular, Western Christianity — has not been kind to the earth. Scriptural interpretation continues to be used to justify fracking and

other earth-destructive acts.

The good news is that this is not the last theological word. Some of us who live within faith traditions are engaged in a practice called eco-theology — sometimes called eco-justice, eco-feminist theology, or cosmic spirituality. We are asking our faith communities to “hear” scripture in radically different ways.

Why do we bother? We bother because religious interpretations have gradually converged with economic interests. The result is a theology which justifies the conquering of earth, rather than its nurturing. Independent of participation in organized religion, those teachings permeate secular culture and justify a secular morality of destruction. To move beyond such a culture of destruction requires challenging religious teachings that treat the earth (creation, environment) as separate and disposable.

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Municipal Roundup

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court reaffirmed local decision-making about fracking, in its 2013 “*Robinson Twp.*” decision. But such decisions are being hotly debated, with grassroots groups forming, community by community, to engage the issue.

- The Borough of [Churchill](#) prevented fracking of the former Churchill Valley Country Club, restricting drilling to large tracts with commercial (“C-1”) zoning.
- Drilling moved forward in [Penn Township](#). The township had asked Apex Energy to wait for resolution of a residents’ lawsuit, but the company threatened to bring its own suit against the township if there were further delays.
- A huge fracking site was [approved](#) in Nottingham Township (Washington County). Residents of neighboring Peters Township — only 400 yards from the site — were not allowed to speak at Nottingham’s meeting regarding the project.



More than 100 people turned out for the Churchill Borough zoning board meeting.

Marcellus Protest is a project of the Thomas Merton Center (Pittsburgh, PA): www.thomasmertoncenter.org

We encourage you to print copies of this newsletter and to distribute it freely. You can download it from our website: www.marcellusprotest.org/news. Source citations for all articles are available upon request.

Health Department Update from Protect Our Parks

PITTSBURGH: As announced [last month](#), *Protect Our Parks* has filed an objection against the accreditation of the Allegheny County Health Department. In a November 23 letter, “POP” asked the Public Health Accreditation Board to deny ACHD’s application, saying that the department is “unable to function in the political environment...” of Allegheny County.

POP’s particular concern about ACHD arose from the Health Department’s role in authorizing a drilling lease at Deer Lakes Park. (In April, 2014, ACHD Director Dr. Karen Hacker told County Council that she was “not aware” of any research linking fracking to ill health.) But as POP looked into the recent history of ACHD, the story grew broader. Now, concludes POP, it is clear that County Executive Rich Fitzgerald has “hijacked” the department so as to subordinate it to his own political agenda.

Despite its name, the Allegheny County Health Department isn’t, legally, part of the county government. It was created

County Election Results: More embarrassment for “Frackin’ Fitz”

PITTSBURGH: If the May primary was a setback to Rich Fitzgerald’s political ambitions, November brought no forward progress. Far back in last place among unopposed candidates, he ran almost 40,000 votes off the pace. County-wide, aside from straight-ticket voters, Mr. Fitzgerald drew 30% fewer votes (for Executive) than did Chelsa Wagner (for Controller).

In some precincts of the 14th Ward (Mr. Fitzgerald’s neighborhood), he lagged Ms. Wagner by as much as 40%. And at places, Nellie (“The best dog in the race”) drew over half as many write-ins as there were votes for the endorsed incumbent.

Despite his reelection, Frackin’ Fitz may not remain in office for another four years. If he waits until 2020 to try the revolving door, there might not be any fracking industry still in business here to offer a cushy job. *[See our financial story on Page 1.]*

through the Home Rule Charter as a separate municipal corporation, by certification of the state Department of Health. But, beginning in 2012, the newly elected County Executive required undated letters of resignation from the department’s Board members, which he then used as leverage to demand that they fire its then-Director (Dr. Bruce Dixon). Subsequently, Mr. Fitzgerald has been claiming—with acquiescence of the Board of Health, that the Health Department reports directly to himself.

Faith and Fracking

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My personal awareness of the theological gap came from a project in which environmentally caring Christians were studying harm from fracking. Although concerned, they could not move beyond putting their faith in “regulation” or “technological solutions”. Our traditions failed us. Destruction of the earth/creation was not a part of theology. We had not learned to see every part of creation – land, air, water and all forms of life – as having moral standing, revealing the presence of the Divine.

In eco-theology-speak, the human relationship to the Divine (God, Love, Source, Spirit) is inseparable from our relationship with the unity of creation (earth/cosmos). Earth is not merely the setting for human actions – something set apart. Destruction of the earth, as in fracking, is violence against the very unity of all of creation and against the presence of the Creator – or spiritual oneness. Eco-theology requires that humans nurture the land; no exceptions.

Scripture is loaded with prophetic cautions of will happen when humans relate to the land through violence, destruction, and greed - sickness, wars, destruction, poverty. Those early story tellers knew what they were talking about.

Imagine the wonderful change that people of faith could bring about with an eco-theological awareness. Instead of earth - conquering, scriptural interpretation would lead people of faith to work for earth-nurturing acts of creation salvation, including rejection of fracking.

Claudia Detwiler

A Range of Resources

Please check out our ‘Resources’ page at www.marcellusprotest.org/resources, and follow us on Facebook (at [Marcellus Protest](#)) and Twitter ([@Marcellus SWPA](#)). Here is a sample from our recent recommendations:

Marcellus-shale.us . Your entry point into the wide-ranging work of Bob Donnan. Consider subscribing to his emailed blog for analysis and end-to-end recording of many local meetings on leasing and zoning decisions.

Upcoming Events in December:

December 3, EPA Teleconference on Fracking and Drinking Water (2:00-6:00pm). A public teleconference to accept comments on the EPA’s draft report on drinking water. (This is the one that drilling advocates characterized as showing “no widespread or systemic impact” on water quality.) Please see our [calendar](#) for details on submitting comments.

December 5, “Shaleshock,” Butler Public Library, (1:00-3:30pm). Sponsored by [Marcellus Outreach Butler](#), presentation and discussion on Shale Gas Infrastructure & Community Organizing: strategies and tactics being used to address the spread of pipelines, processing plants and other “midstream” operations.

Updated information on these topics (with links to original sources), along with our calendar of upcoming events, and other resources, can be found at www.marcellusprotest.org.