

# In Western Pennsylvania, an Energy Boom Not Visibly Stifled



Jeff Swensen for The New York Times

Linda Headley and her husband, David, say they get headaches from drilling on their property, but not the benefits: They own the land, but not the gas rights.

By JONATHAN WEISMAN  
Published: June 20, 2012

SMITHFIELD, Pa. — From his farm nestled far from the big cities, in the wooded hills above the Monongahela and Cheat Rivers, David Headley has not heard much about the battles in Washington over regulations that Republicans say are stifling a domestic energy revolution.

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At the ground level of that revolution Mr. Headley, a 53-year-old former body shop owner and unemployed bus driver, does not see any regulations at all.

For three years, he and his wife, Linda, have wrestled with the land men, [natural gas](#) drillers and pipeline builders who are turning this very sleepy corner of Western Pennsylvania into an energy boom land. The farm Mr. Headley bought in 2006 for his semiretirement has become

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Jeff Swensen for The New York Times  
Keith Rothfus, a Republican candidate for the House in Western Pennsylvania, calls the district "America's new energy capital."

something of a nightmare. Gas wells leak. Drilling blowouts have spewed fine, chalky bentonite into trout-stocked Georges Creek, turning it a milky white. A spring where his wife's three horses once watered now bubbles and belches. Touched with a flame, it will ignite.

The Headleys blame the men who worked on the drilling platform in their front yard for the disappearance of their beagle, Sarah. Linda had to rescue their remaining dog, Banjo, from a sludge pond, leaving her hands cracked and burning for six months.

And last month, a dispute over an \$11,000 payment for a pipeline right of way ended with state troopers, guns drawn, pouring out of 10 patrol cars and accusing Mr. Headley of criminal trespassing on his own land. A judge forced the gas company to pay the money — and slapped Mr. Headley with an injunction to keep 50 feet from the pipeline running through his property.

"They're doing whatever they want, whenever they want to," he said, shaking his head as he walked by the shale gas well head and separation tanks humming in sight and earshot of his front porch.

For more than a year now, Republicans in Washington — and Mitt Romney on the stump — have been pressing the case that the Obama administration is trying to squash an energy boom already well under way, fostered by the technological development of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

On Thursday, the House will vote on a broad bill to streamline the energy permitting process on federal lands and direct the administration to establish production objectives for [oil](#), [gas](#), [coal](#) and oil shale — part of a broader effort to establish Republicans as champions of domestic energy. On Wednesday, the Senate voted down a Republican bill to stop new regulations on utility emissions.

"We have these Big Government policies out of D. C. that are turning off the lights," said Keith Rothfus, a Republican House candidate in a newly drawn Western Pennsylvania district he calls "America's new energy capital."

But to make that case, Republicans will have to convince voters in regions like Western Pennsylvania that the free-for-all they see all around them could somehow be even more, well, free. It is a tough sell.

"It's the Wild West," said C. J. Callahan, a 29-year-old banker in Point Marion, grabbing dinner with his wife and newborn baby at Apple Annie's, just down the road from the Headleys. "There aren't regulations. It's just, get it out as quick as you can, because they're going to do the regulations down the road."

The natural gas industry is toeing the same difficult line, boasting of its explosive growth while warning of the dangers to come. A study released this month by [America's Natural Gas Alliance](#), a trade group, concluded that unconventional natural gas activities employed one million Americans in 2010, and that employment would grow to 1.5 million by 2015 and to more than 2.4 million by 2035.

Between 2010 and 2035, the gas boom will generate nearly \$1.5 trillion in federal, state and local taxes and royalty revenues, the economic firm IHS predicted.

Early last year, Western Pennsylvania's Washington County chalked up the third-fastest



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growth among the country's 322 largest counties. Just to the north, Butler County ranked sixth. Between those two, Beaver County could soon be the site of a Royal Dutch Shell ethane cracker, a billion-dollar plant that breaks down the gas ethane into the more valuable industrial compound ethylene.

Even the federally owned Allegheny National Forest is open for gas business, industry officials say.

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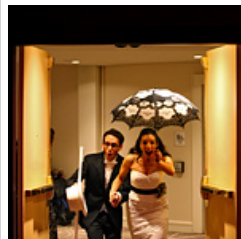
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“It’s unbelievable, the opportunity,” said Frank Puskarich, 58, a Washington County former coal miner who in five years has seen his mobile Hog Father’s Bar-B-Que expand to three trucks and three trailers traveling four states to cater to the natural gas trade. “And it’s not just me. It’s leather makers, grocery stores, truck drivers, guys with dump trucks.”

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A well in Washington County, Pa.

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Stanley E. Cree says he has “made a small fortune myself” partly because land he bought for \$3,500 an acre long ago is now selling for \$33,600 an acre.

Yet, the industry also says, a looming Environmental Protection Agency study on fracking and a cumbersome Army Corps of Engineering permitting process are creating uncertainty, turning some of the public against gas.

“We certainly haven’t met the potential,” said Kathryn Klaber, president of the [Marcellus Shale Coalition](#), a Pittsburgh-based industry alliance pressing for development of the vast Marcellus shale “play” that stretches from West Virginia to upstate New York.

The fortunes to be made have salved the headaches and heartaches in this stretch of Gasland. The Headleys are the unlucky ones. The wells on their property are spinning off an estimated \$20,000 a month in royalties — not for them, but for the New Jersey man who sold them the property, but kept the gas rights.

Still, whole towns have been woken from the dead.

Stanley E. Cree, 81, said trucks rumble by his house in Waynesburg 24 hours a day.

“Oh hell, yes, it’s helped a lot of people,” he said. “Heck, I’ve made a small fortune myself.”

The 50 acres he bought long ago for \$3,500 an acre is now

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selling for \$33,600. He has sold 10 or 12 of them, he figured, plus pipeline rights of way for an additional \$300,000.

Mr. Headley said the drilling foreman on his property told him he had drilled all over the world but never in a place easier than Pennsylvania: "Ask for what you want and you'll get it," he quoted the driller.

Matt Pitzarella, a spokesman for the [Range Resources Corporation](#), the discoverer of the Marcellus play, bristled at the term "Wild West." He pointed out the stone verge along the gravel road leading down from a bustling fracking operation in Washington County, the rubber tarmac, the resodded hillside and the emergency "spill kits" — all required by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

"Anyone suggesting a lack of regulations for this industry in Pennsylvania is a fool," he said.

But beyond the frack pads and drilling wells, it appears to be easier to find voters here worried more about too little regulation than too much.

Joe Bezjak, a retired junior high school principal in Nicholson Township, called the notion of overregulation "ludicrous." In fact, he said, the whole region is bought and paid for by the gas men. Last month, police officers handcuffed him at gunpoint after a foreman on his property accused Mr. Bezjak of threatening him in a dispute over the farm's electric fencing that had been repeatedly torn down by pipeline builders.

"I had a peaceful, loving life," Mr. Bezjak, 73, said. "Believe me, I haven't had many enjoyable days since these people have been around."

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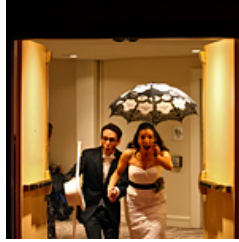
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