

Sportsmen monitor gas drilling in Marcellus Shale

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In this photo made on Thursday, June 9, 2011, members of the local chapter of the fishermen's group, "The Izaak Walton League", John Yesenosky, left, and Ken Dufalla test water samples taken from Whitely Creek in Kirby, Pa. (AP Photo/Keith Srakocic)

(AP) -- Fishermen are gearing up and hunters are taking aim - for Marcellus Shale gas drilling.

A new coalition of outdoors groups is emerging as a potent force in the debate over natural gas drilling. The Sportsmen Alliance for Marcellus Conservation isn't against the process of fracking for gas, but its members want to make sure the rush to cash in on the valuable resource doesn't damage streams, forests, and the various creatures that call those places home.

The movement grew out of grass-roots anger as passionate outdoorsmen found their questions about drilling and wildlife brought few answers from local or state officials.

"Either we didn't get a response or the answer we got didn't seem feasible or acceptable. It didn't seem like the people who were in charge had their pulse on what was actually happening," said Ken Dufalla of Clarksville, Pa.

Energy companies have identified major reserves of natural gas throughout the Marcellus Shale, which underlies much of New York and Pennsylvania, and parts of Maryland, Ohio and West Virginia.

More than 3,300 wells have been drilled across Pennsylvania in just the last few years. The boom has raised concerns about the use of [hydraulic fracturing](#), or fracking, a drilling technique in which water, sand and a small amount of chemicals are used to open gas-bearing shale formations deep underground.

Already, preliminary water testing by sportsmen is showing consistently high levels of bromides and total dissolved solids in some streams near fracking operations, Dufalla said. Bromide is a salt that reacts with the chlorine [disinfectants](#) used by drinking water systems and creates trihalomethanes. The U.S. [Environmental Protection Agency](#) says trihalomethanes can be harmful to people who drink water with elevated levels for many years.

Dufalla stands alongside Whiteley Creek, a little mountain stream in Greene County. But something is wrong. The grass is lush and the woods are green, but the water is cloudy and dead-looking.

"It used to be a nice stream," teeming with minnows, crawfish and other aquatic life, he told The Associated Press. No more, said Dufalla, a

former deputy game and fish warden for Pennsylvania.

He's worried that nearby [gas drilling](#) has damaged the creek, either from improper discharges of waters used in fracking, or from extensive withdrawals of water. The drilling industry says numerous studies have shown fracking is environmentally safe, but Dufalla and other sportsmen want to be sure.

The goal is to build a water quality database that identifies problem areas and makes that information available to the public. Currently, there's little scientific information about whether or how much fracking water impacts wildlife.

Numbers suggest that many people share Dufalla's concerns, in Pennsylvania and throughout the region. Two years ago his local chapter of the Izaak Walton League (a fishing group) had 19 members. Today there are 111.

More than half a dozen existing outdoors groups are part of the Sportsmen Alliance, and collectively they have more than 60,000 members in the states that overlay the Marcellus. Numbers like that mean there's an established grapevine to reach sportsmen and women, and the ties to national groups bring access to experts and funding.

Members of the Sportsmen Alliance are scheduled to meet in July with Michael Krancer, the new secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, said Katy Dunlap, a spokeswoman for Trout Unlimited, a national fishing group based in Arlington, Va.

"We are making specific requests with regards to Wilderness trout waters in Pennsylvania," Dunlap said, such as additional review of proposed wells near such waters.

Some areas may be too environmentally sensitive for drilling, and the Sportsmen Alliance is building a list of places that need special protection, Dunlap said. "Places that once you destroy, you can't take back," she said.

Whether the drilling industry would accept additional limits in some areas remains to be seen.

So many wildlife lovers have expressed concern over drilling that the Sportsmen Alliance has moved beyond relying on volunteers.

Earlier this year Dave Sewak began working full-time across Pennsylvania, giving educational talks and training a network of volunteer water testers. "We support the energy development; we just want to see it done right the first time. I think hunters and fishermen are the original environmentalists," said Sewak, a Windber, Pa. resident. He's paid by Trout Unlimited.

There has been considerable public debate over how and if fracking impacts drinking water supplies, but Dufalla and other sportsmen are worried that even low concentrations of fracking chemicals may affect aquatic invertebrates - the tiny water bugs that grow into mayflies and stoneflies, which are in turn eaten by fish and birds.

The sportsmen worry that a stream without bugs could quickly become a stream without fish, and then a valley with fewer birds, and so on up the food chain.

There are signs that both the drilling industry and sportsmen are trying to find common ground. Patrick Creighton, a spokesman for the Marcellus Shale Coalition, a drilling industry business group, told the AP his group has already met with numerous outdoors groups.

"It's a relationship that we're building," he said. They're also working with local groups on a set of "best management practices."

Some pro-drilling outdoorsmen said that's exactly the area that needs work.

Ed Gaw leased drilling rights to a five-acre tract of his 140-acre farm in Evans City, Pa., to the T.W. Phillips Co. and fracking began in the spring of 2009. The next year the drillers did what they considered to be a basic restoration.

"Their idea of reclaiming a site and mine were kind of night and day," said Gaw, who knew when he signed the lease that the landscape would never look as it had before.

But Gaw didn't just complain. He got to work, investing about \$20,000 in a restoration that included planting hundreds of spruce and fruit trees. Now there are more deer on the property than before drilling began, he said.

But no one wanted to talk about restoration in the beginning. Gaw remembers telling the drilling company that a beautiful restoration would be in their long-term interest too, but they didn't see the point. "I'm going take you guys kicking and screaming into this model recovery," he recalls saying.

He was right.

Last year, the Pennsylvania Game Commission sponsored a field day on the issue of reclamation at the Gaw Farm, which is about 30 miles north of Pittsburgh. At the time state officials echoed some of Gaw's concerns.

"Landowners have received a wealth of information across the state on

leasing, but little attention has been paid to reclamation and habitat recovery," said Tim Hoppe, Northwest Region Wildlife Diversity Biologist for the Game Commission.

Part of the challenge for outdoorsmen and industry is that there isn't much scientific information on how or if fracking impacts wildlife in the Marcellus Shale region.

University of Pennsylvania biologist Margaret Brittingham is just starting such a project, with support from the Pennsylvania Game Commission. The study will look at how drilling changes the forest habitat, and how it could impact wildlife. But it will be a few years before results are in, and that's just one study.

In the meantime, the sportsmen know the value of keeping their hooks sharp and their powder dry, so to speak.

Trout Unlimited and some of the other sportsmen groups have staff attorneys and a history of organizing and funding successful water quality lawsuits.

Dufalla hopes the volunteer water testing database becomes a tool for negotiating with state officials and the drilling industry.

If the testing shows an ongoing pattern of water quality problems near drilling operations the sportsmen may file lawsuits, he said.

"It's the last thing you want to do," Dufalla said.

But some people in rural communities are past accepting assurances by the industry that fracking doesn't cause environmental problems. Some who don't even hunt or fish have joined the effort to patrol waterways.

Waynesburg resident Chuck Hunnell, 68, said a recent public meeting on drilling was the most radical one he's ever been to. But what he sees in the community he grew up in has turned him into an activist monitoring the [drilling](#) industry.

"And now until I breathe my last breath, I'm going to be checking on these people," Hunnell said.

More information: <http://www.sportsmenalliance.org/index.htm>

<http://marcelluscoalition.org/>

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