Fracking fury hits idyllic British village

August 4 2013, by Judith Evans

Police monitor protesters near a drill site operated by Cuadrilla Resources in Balcombe, England, on July 31, 2013. Protestors fear Cuadrilla will use the controversial method of hydraulic fracturing or 'fracking' of oil and gas from underground shale rock.

Louisa Delpy had never protested before, but when she heard that shale gas extraction might begin in her leafy part of the English countryside, she was so furious that she took to the streets.

The 36-year-old mother went with two friends and a home-made sign to

the lonely site where test drilling for oil and gas has begun, close to her upmarket village of Balcombe in West Sussex, a fifty-minute train ride from central London.

Three weeks later, the gaggle of demonstrators has mushroomed into a protest camp of hundreds, becoming the focus of a national campaign against the controversial extraction technique known as "fracking".

Protesters from around Britain have set up dozens of tents, loudspeakers and banners, while crowds surge forward with yells of fury to try to block each truck that drives towards the drilling site.

"I've never protested against anything in my life, but look where we are now," Delpy said.

Waving signs with slogans such as "Frack off!" and "Balcombe's not for shale", the campers say they will stay as long as it takes for Cuadrilla, the firm that has pioneered fracking in Britain, to reconsider its involvement.

A prosperous commuter area in the home territory of Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservative party, Balcombe is an unlikely birthplace for a rowdy protest movement.

But many residents say that having objected unsuccessfully through official channels, they feel forced into direct action.

"All the normal forms of democracy seem to have been ignored," said Stephen White, 59, a filmmaker from a nearby village. "It's like the Wild West."

Cuadrilla—whose chairman is former BP chief John Browne—has tried to pacify the locals, holding open days and promising not to "ruin the

countryside".

It also says it is merely carrying out test drilling, which could lead to standard oil extraction, fracking, or nothing at all. The plan is to drill a 3,000-foot (915-metre) vertical well in a project lasting up to three months.

Protestors lie on the road to a drill site operated by Cuadrilla Resources in Balcombe, England, on July 31, 2013. Protesters against 'fracking' from around Britain have set up dozens of tents, loudspeakers and banners, while crowds surge forward with yells of fury to try to block each truck that drives towards the drilling site.

But Cuadrilla's involvement elsewhere with fracking, or hydraulic fracturing—using huge amounts of pressurised water mixed with chemicals to crack open rock and release natural gas—has fuelled

suspicion.

Protesters bowed their heads for a minute's silence on Friday when news arrived that drilling had begun.

"It's a sad day for Balcombe—but we will win!" declared 52-year-old Glayzer Frackman from Lancashire in the north, who turned activist and changed his name after his house was damaged by minor earthquakes blamed on test drilling.

Like the other protesters, he also worries about potential chemical contamination of the air and water, and possible water shortages.

The entertainer and DJ is one of dozens to arrive from Lancashire, a key testing area since the Conservative-led government took a strong stance in favour of fracking, which has led to a shale gas bonanza in the United States.

Britain has proposed tax breaks for fracking companies, hoping to boost jobs and tax revenues while increasing energy security, although the technique has been banned in France and halted in Germany.

Last week a Conservative member of parliament's House of Lords, David Howell, infuriated swathes of Britain when he suggested the "desolate" northeast as a good place to frack.

He then corrected himself—to say he had meant the "unloved" northwest.

Balcombe's protest camp now has a kitchen, portable toilets and a children's play area. Demonstrators hold meditation sessions and concerts, and passing cars honk their horns in support.

Dozens of police vans surround the camp, manned by up to 70 officers.

Police personnel escort a lorry to the entrance of a drill site operated by Cuadrilla Resources in Balcombe, England, on July 31, 2013.

There have been more than 30 arrests, amid scuffles with police and protest stunts including a group who locked themselves to an antique fire engine, blocking access to the site for six hours.

Celebrity campaigners such as Bianca Jagger, ex-wife of Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger, have made appearances.

The camp also includes well-heeled professionals, with some protesters brandishing academic studies on the dangers of fracking.

In Balcombe itself, a village of immaculate brick houses, staff at the pub

said they were "remaining neutral" while rumours circulated of a mystery thief taking down anti-fracking posters from local tea rooms.

But it is hard to find anyone there who says they oppose the camp.

"It's polarising people a little bit," said trainee nutritionist Nancy Towers, 47. "But I think it's wonderful. They're very peaceful people."

One 80-year-old villager, who asked not to be named, said she would protest on Saturday.

"I'm normally against protesting," she said. "I wouldn't go on marches, but this is important."

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