

Written Testimony of Jill Antares Hunkler, seventh-generation Ohio Valley resident
House Committee on Oversight & Reform, Subcommittee on the Environment
Hearing on “The Role of Fossil Fuel Subsidies in Preventing Action on the Climate Crisis.”
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It is an honor to have this opportunity to share the truth about fossil fuel extraction in Appalachia. I respect the members of this subcommittee and appreciate your courageous leadership in service of the people. My intention is to share this truth: Continuing to subsidize the fossil fuel industry will not only perpetuate the climate crisis, but the plastics pollution, environmental justice and public health crises, as well.¹

I consider myself a fracking refugee. I was forced from my home at the headwaters of the historically pristine Captina Creek Watershed in Belmont County, Ohio, after being surrounded by oil and gas infrastructure and the associated pollution from a compressor station, 78 fracking wells, a transfer station and an interstate pipeline with numerous gathering pipelines, all within a five-mile radius of my home. I lived in the hollow below the oil and gas infrastructure, with Slope Creek running through my yard. The air pollution emanating from these facilities contains volatile organic compounds, some of which are known carcinogens, that are heavier than air and hover in the hollows. I never imagined that my quiet, healthy, country way of life would disappear. The negative health impacts we experienced were too much to bear. First, we noticed the odors and had nose, eye, and throat irritation, as well as headaches. The symptoms worsened over time with nausea, vertigo, rashes, mental confusion, disorientation, numbness, and body aches and pains. True wealth is good health, and our health and happiness suffered as long as we stayed in the hollow.

Due to the invasiveness of shale gas development, southeastern Ohio has been described by many as living in an occupied territory.² Belmont County is the most heavily fracked in the state with 595 producing wells.³ Those of us living in these once peaceful hills are not only dealing with negative health impacts from the oil and gas industry. We are also experiencing unsafe roadways due to heavy industry traffic, air and noise pollution, public, well and spring water contamination, pipeline explosions and well pad fires, including one operated by a Norwegian oil

¹ According to some estimates, fossil fuel subsidies sustain global greenhouse gas emissions at levels 28 percent higher than the market would without them. A recent report by Penn Future found that Pennsylvania’s \$3.8 billion in fossil fuel subsidies in FY 2019 helped support the \$11.1 billion in negative externalities caused by the state’s unconventional gas industry (FY 2019). See Emily Persico, Rob Altenburg and Christina Simeone, “Buried Out of Sight: Uncovering Pennsylvania’s Hidden Fossil Fuel Subsidies,” *Penn Future*, February 2021, retrieved from https://www.pennfuture.org/Files/Admin/PF_FossilFuel_Report_final_2.12.21.pdf.

² Wypijewski, Joanne, “What Happened When Fracking Came to Town,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/31/books/review/eliza-griswold-amity-and-prosperity.html>

³ ShaleXP, “Oil & Gas Activity in Belmont County, OH,” accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.shalexp.com/ohio/belmont-county>

company⁴ that contaminated a stream that feeds our mighty Ohio River, resulting in the death of 70,000 fish.⁵ Our water supplies are being depleted by industry withdrawals from our reservoirs, ponds and streams. In 2018, a fracking well blowout in Belmont County caused one of the largest methane leaks in US history,⁶ forcing area residents to evacuate from their homes. And in another horrifying instance, a brine truck accident contaminated Barnesville's reservoir with radioactive materials.⁷ At the time of the brine truck accident and spill, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency water test results showed a spike in radium, a naturally occurring radioactive element that is brought to the surface during the fracking process.

I witnessed a former oilfield service operations manager react in shock and anger to an illustration showing the transmission of radioactivity to industry workers in a 2016 Report of the International Association of Oil & Gas Producers entitled, "Managing Naturally Occurring Radioactive Material (NORM) in the oil and gas industry" He was completely unaware of potential radiological exposure or the existence of internationally recognized guidelines, which are largely ignored by US oil and gas operators.⁸

The industry continues to tout misinformation about America's clean energy future when in fact it produces toxic, radioactive waste,⁹ destroys massive amounts of precious freshwater for its singular use, and makes the region poorer rather than richer in the long run. There are 240 Class II wastewater injection wells in Ohio. Nearly 1.5 billion gallons of wastewater have been produced here.¹⁰ Now, fracking wastewater has been permitted for transport via barging on the Ohio River, threatening the drinking water source of five million people.¹¹

⁴ NRK TV, "Equinors farlige eventyr," released December 9, 2020, https://tv.nrk.no/serie/brennpunkt/2020/MDDP11000920?fbclid=IwAR17HDR2ZzjlvTXBtrDAm-G55KsPJpXH5OBZCJjDQ3oK_ol6PJd3aYI4rcU

⁵ Duane Nichols, "Over 70,000 Fish & Aquatic Creatures Killed by Pollution from Ohio Frack Well Fire," *FrackCheckWV*, July 22, 2014, <http://www.frackcheckwv.net/2014/07/22/over-70000-fish-aquatic-creatures-killed-by-pollution-from-ohio-frack-well-fire/>

⁶ Hiroki Tabuchi, "A Methane Leak, Seen From Space, Proves to Be Far Larger Than Thought," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/16/climate/methane-leak-satellite.html>.

⁷ Staff, "Ohio EPA: Barnesville Water Is Safe to Drink Despite Radioactive Element," *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, April 3, 2016, <https://www.theintelligencer.net/news/top-headlines/2016/04/ohio-epa-barnesville-water-is-safe-to-drink-despite-radioactive-element/>

⁸ Justin Nobel, "America's Radioactive Secret," *Rolling Stone*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/oil-gas-fracking-radioactive-investigation-937389/>

⁹ Elise G. Elliott et. al., "A systematic evaluation of chemicals in hydraulic-fracturing fluids and wastewater for reproductive and developmental toxicity," *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology*, January 6, 2016, <https://www.nature.com/articles/jes201581>

¹⁰ Ted Auch, "OH Class II Injection Wells: Waste Disposal Trends and Images from Around Ohio," *FracTracker Alliance*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.fractracker.org/2016/07/oh-class-ii-injection-trends-images/>

¹¹ Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission (ORSANCO), "River Facts," accessed April 18, 2021, <http://www.orsanco.org/river-facts/>

Another crucial truth that I must bring to light is that in the years since the fracking boom began, Belmont & other eastern Ohio gas producing counties haven't gained jobs because of fracking. In fact, they have lost more than 6,500 jobs, according to data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And the region's population has declined by more than 13,000 people according to the Ohio River Valley Institute's research,¹² which has dispelled myths of lasting economic benefits and job creation in Appalachian fracking counties. According to Sean O'Leary, Senior Researcher at the Ohio River Valley Institute, "Over the period of the Appalachian natural gas boom, the contribution of the region's gas-producing counties to the nation's gross domestic product grew by more than one-third. But its share of jobs, of personal income, and of population all declined. That's a terrible deal economically and probably the most vivid example this nation has produced of 'the resource curse'."

That's why there's little reason to believe that cutting subsidies for the fossil fuel industry will result in lost jobs. And the local oil and gas workers are often the least valued assets of the industry. They are exploited, given the worst, most dangerous, and most often are the least-paid contract jobs without healthcare and retirement benefits.

For several years, I have helped document the destruction to my homelands by the oil and gas industry in collaboration with Dr. Ted Auch, Great Lakes Program Coordinator at FracTracker Alliance. We witnessed an alarming event while investigating oil and gas sites. On a backcountry road near several fracking sites with gathering pipeline construction occurring, we met industry workers who were sprinkling a white powder and then shoveling it up, trying to absorb the dark substance that had been spilled on the road. I drove along asking every worker what they were cleaning up. None of them knew. One concerned worker stated, "No, I don't know what this stuff is, but I know we shouldn't be walking in it."

According to Auch, "Appalachia is a region familiar with the 'resource curse.' but the difference between coal and fracking is the speed at which the latter entered the region, industrialized large swaths of it, and just as quickly moved on bringing with it its largely migratory and non-unionized labor force. All the while, fracking employed very few locals, was constantly appealing to state departments of taxation for write-downs, and managing to get whatever they needed in exchange for a community park here or a scoreboard there."

I am living in a sacrifice zone due to the polluting and poorly regulated oil and gas industry. Now, the petrochemical industry wants to create even more toxic air and water pollution in the Ohio River Valley.¹³ This industry would require even more fracking in our region to provide the

¹² Sean O'Leary, "Appalachia's Natural Gas Counties: Contributing More to the U.S. Economy and Getting Less in Return," *Ohio River Valley Institute*, February 2021, <https://ohiorivervalleyinstitute.org/new-report-natural-gas-county-economies-suffered-as-production-boomed/>

¹³ Erica Jackson, "PTTGC's Ethane Cracker Project: Risks of Bringing Plastic Manufacturing to Ohio," *FracTracker Alliance*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.fractracker.org/2018/11/pttgc-ethane-cracker/>

feedstock to make plastic. The regulatory agencies are already failing to protect communities from the air pollution from fracking. Now, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency has granted air permits to the PTT Global Chemical ethane cracker plant, a monstrous petrochemical facility that would ‘crack’ ethane from fracked gas into ethylene, a component of single-use plastics manufacturing. If constructed, the Thai-owned PTTGC facility would spew hundreds of tons of hazardous contaminants into the air each year, potentially causing or exacerbating a host of long- and short-term health problems like COPD, asthma, and various types of cancer. The PTTG plant’s construction would also lay the foundation for a broader petrochemical buildout across central Appalachia, entrenching our communities in an ever-worsening natural gas sacrifice zone. The cracker would draw ethane supplies from the proposed Mountaineer natural gas liquid storage facility, which would develop salt caverns to store up to 3.25 million barrels of explosive, highly flammable ethane, propane, and butane next to and potentially beneath the Ohio River, posing a significant threat to local public health and safety. Companies are trying to secure federal support for these petrochemical projects in the form of loan guarantees from the Department of Energy. This cannot be allowed to happen. “The federal government should not lock in another generation of fossil fuel infrastructure by asking taxpayers to prop up this industry through loan guarantees and other forms of financial support,” according to Victoria Bogdan Tejada, staff attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Not only have I been personally negatively impacted to the point where I had to leave my home to feel safe - there are many others. There is a family recently diagnosed with serious illness because the largest natural gas fired power plant is being built on top of them and others - with no regard for the impact of the construction and operation upon those who have lived in that area for generations. There are so many families suffering, and entire communities experiencing negative health impacts. If it weren't for pro bono and low bono lawyers who have come to help, they would be left with no recourse. Daily we are losing our rights to a healthy environment and peaceful enjoyment of property - and even free speech and the right to protest, because of the lobbying and donations of the oil and gas industry and the political compromise it creates. The industry boom will bust,¹⁴ and we will be left once again to pay for their damages like acid mine drainage, human health harms and abandoned wells and legacy pollution.

We must embrace a better vision for Appalachia as we move forward, creating renewable energy economies, regenerative agricultural development, and infrastructure improvements for a brighter future. There must be a global commitment to restore peace and harmony with nature.

¹⁴ According to some analysts, it already has. Since 2010, shale-focused oil and gas companies have reported negative free cash flows totalling \$158 billion, and the industry’s falling capital investments in FY 2020 limit growth prospects, “sending clear signals to investors that North America’s oil and gas production is poised to shrink.” See Clark Williams-Derry et al., “In a Tumultuous 2020, Shale Firms Slashed Capex To Generate Cash,” *Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis*, March 2021, retrieved from http://ieefa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Shale-Producers-Spilled-2-Billion-inRed-Ink-Last-Year_March-2021.pdf

We do have the power to make positive changes in our communities, but we must act now. We shall remain persistent and resistant to all that threatens our children's future. Thank you.