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With Fracking Threatening Its Sole Drinking Water Source, A Coastal Community Fights Back

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ABITA SPRINGS, LOUISIANA – Since its founding as a Native American trading village, Abita Springs has staked its reputation on its clean air and pure waters. Princess Abita of the Choctaw tribe, as the local legend goes, was wasting away in filthy New Orleans in the 1780s until she traveled north and drank from the healing spring that gave the town its name.

A few hundred years later, Abita Brewery set up shop in town because of the “pristine” aquifer water it now uses in its internationally popular beers. “The sage, clean environment has always been very, very important to Abita Springs,” said the town’s mayor Greg Lemons. “The quality of life is high here.”

But now, residents fear the pristine aquifer, the sole source of drinking water for miles, could be under threat of contamination as a fossil fuel company eyes the oil and gas deposits below.

In December, over the objections of Mayor Lemons and many arish residents, Louisiana’s Department of Natural Resources approved a permit for the corporation Helis Oil & Gas to drill an exploratory well two and a half miles deep in the wooded wetlands just outside Abita Springs. If they find the fossil fuels they’re looking for, the company plans to extract it through the controversial process of hydraulic fracturing, known commonly as fracking.

As Louisiana residents watch their coastal wetlands disintegrate, a process exacerbated by oil and gas extraction, leaving communities to allow more oil and gas exploration in those very wetlands.

The proposed project near Abita Springs not only threatens to contaminate the sole drinking water source of the town and its surrounding communities, but it comes at a time when the state is wrestling with questions of corporate accountability, home rule, and the ecological and social consequences of rapid wetland loss.

Though Helis still needs a water quality certification from the state Department of Environmental Quality before they can begin drilling, they have already leased 68,000 acres from local wealthy landowner Edward Poitevent – all of it sitting atop the possibly fossil fuel-rich Tuscaloosa Marine Shale deposit that stretches across Louisiana and its neighboring states. The company would also have to overcome the local parish’s zoning laws, which currently do not allow for any heavy industrial activity in the area, and

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emerge victorious from a number of lawsuits filed by surrounding communities who would be impacted by a fracking boom.

Then there are the residents of St. Tammany Parish, who say they're not going down without a fight.

Sandra Slifer, President of the League of Women Voters of Louisiana and a co-founder of the grassroots group Tammany Together, said that she has never seen such a strong mobilization in her conservative parish. "I can't remember another time when hundreds of people came to a public meeting and sat on bleachers in a school gymnasium for four and a half hours, at least, before they had a chance to speak," she said. "People stayed until 12:30 in the morning."

In the spring, concerned residents began approaching local businesses one by one, presenting them with scientific information about the dangers of fracking and urging them to put up signs of opposition in their windows. Despite some initial reluctance, especially considering the Northshore Business Council and the West St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce support the drilling bid, dozens of bars, cafes, and stores agreed.

"It's never easy for businesses in a state like Louisiana to step up and go against the status quo," Slifer said. "We have a hundred-plus-year history of being dominated by oil and gas interests, so it takes a lot of courage for businesses to make a public statement against the industry."

Patrick Courreges, the Communications Director of the Department of Natural Resources, said this level of local opposition to a drilling permit is unprecedented. His office churns out between 1,500 and 2,000 oil and gas drilling permits a year, and as far as he can remember, no community has demanded public hearings of been as engaged as St. Tammany.

"Oil and gas production has been going on for more than a century in Louisiana," he said. "Most of the time, a company files a permit, it's reviewed, checked and they go forward. But this is an area where folks are not used to it, so it's kind of a culture shock for them."

Slifer partly credits this mobilization to the state Department of Natural Resources' decision to grant the fracking permit in violation of the town's local zoning laws, which designate the site in question as residential. "The St. Tammany government worked on zoning for decades, with lots of input and time and energy from residents," she said. "So to see the state come in and say, 'It doesn't matter, we know what's best for you,' it makes a mockery of the community."

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Concerned Citizens of St. Tammany member Terri Lewis Stevens, who lives in neighboring Covington, says her group officially intervened in the zoning lawsuit out of concern that giving the state a trump card could set a dangerous precedent. “if this is allowed, fracking could be next to a schoolhouse, a courthouse, a nurse, or anywhere,” she said.

Slifer and other anti-fracking advocates said while they are focused on defeating Helis’ current proposal, their eventual aim is a ban on fracking in the parish. To move toward this goal, they invited activists from Denton, Texas, who recently passed a fracking ban that they are now defending in court, to share ideas and tactics for pursuing such efforts in a fossil-fuel-friendly state.

“We’re both in the heart of oil and gas in Texas and Louisiana, and this is an opportunity for activists to compare notes,” she said. “What triggered the reaction in the residents to say ‘No more.’ How did they bring together divergent groups of people, including government? What worked? What didn’t work? How did they get to the point where they were able to have an election in a town – I don’t want to say dominated, but influenced by oil and gas?”

As St. Tammany residents continue their outreach and organizing efforts, what may ultimately derail Helis’ plans is the requirements of a wetland permit from the Army Corps of Engineers – a federal entity residents believe is much less inclined to side with oil and gas interests than Louisiana’s agencies.

“The Department of Natural Resources, the Office of Conservation, and the Department of Environmental Quality are captive agencies,” St. Tammany resident Mike Stagg wrote in an email. “They view their primary duty as serving the interests of the industries that most citizens (perhaps naively) expect to protect our interests.”

The permit issued by the Department of Natural Resources last month does come with some restrictions. For example, Helis would have to use privately owned ponds for holding their fracking wastewater, and those ponds could not be fed by groundwater. Helis would also have to disclose all the chemicals it uses to frack – a move not usually required thanks to a gap in federal law commonly known as the Halliburton loophole, which designates such chemical mixes as protected trade secrets. The permit also sets out a long list of requirements for monitoring groundwater, air, storm water and noise levels and for making that information public.

In justifying its decision to grant the exploratory drilling permit, the state agency argued that there are already more than 1,000 oil and gas wells already drilled through the Southern Hills Aquifer. “The chosen well site is at an optimum location to efficiently and economically drain the unit and to minimize the environmental impact and disruption or

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inconvenience to the public,” the agency wrote.

Courreges with the Department of Natural Resources added that Helis Oil and Gas is “in good standing” with the state, and their record of previous drilling projects includes only “some housekeeping issues” but “no major environmental problems.”

This is not enough to allay the concerns of local residents like Stephanie Gray, a Louisiana State University professor who lives in the town of Covington in St. Tammany Parish.

“We’re concerned about damage to the natural environment,” she said. “We’re concerned about truck traffic, increases in accidents. And this particular drill site is about a mile away from a high school, so there aren’t only small towns being impacted, but a lot of subdivisions, businesses and kids, too.”

The Department of Natural Resources’ drilling permit assures residents that Helis’ plan “uses the best available and safest technology,” and notes, “any potential risks of corrosion will only occur long after the hydraulic fracturing has occurred.”

That’s exactly what Mayor Lemons, who is currently suing to maintain the area under residential zoning, is worried about.

“Those wells will still be there in 50 or 70 years,” he said. “If [the casing] fails, it’s a big failure, not a little one. People die. Animals die. Properties are ruined. A lot of these chemicals are carcinogens that have a long term effect, and those very bad chemicals in the ground will eventually come up.”

According to a recent study by the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, the proposed fracking exploration threatens the “sole potable water source” for St. Tammany Parish, which provides water to at least a quarter of a million people. The study concludes that “failure of a single well may equate to loss of the water supply to local communities. In general, remediation of contaminated aquifers is difficult or impossible. Loss of the water supply could jeopardize the very existence of the community.”

The Foundation also notes that the fracking project would impact several “endangered, rare, and threatened” species, including the rainbow snake, the long tailed weasel, and several types of turtles, tortoises, frogs and birds.

In its permit, the state Department of Natural Resources dismissed these arguments out of hand, saying, “those in opposition to the permit have presented no credible information or scientific studies in support of their position.”

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In November, the federal Environmental Protection Agency publicly urged the Army Corps of Engineers to reject Helis' bid for a permit, writing: "The jurisdictional wetlands that would be impacted by this project not only provide wildlife habitat, but also perform valuable water quality maintenance functions by removing excess nutrients and pollutants from the water. They also provide flood water storage. As you are aware, wetland areas such as those proposed to be impacted have experienced a tremendous decline in Louisiana."

The Army Corps of Engineers has also noted that Helis has failed to prove they considered non-wetland areas for drilling and have not demonstrated any plans to minimize damage should they get the go-ahead to begin fracking.

In statements posted on its website, Helis has brushed aside these concerns, telling the public that "this project will be highly regulated and well-supervised" and claiming "there is no risk of contamination to the aquifer."

Stop a random Louisianian on the street, and there's a good chance he or she has a connection to the oil and gas industry. Those leading the charge against fracking in St. Tammany Parish are no different.

Staggs, a Louisiana native who now organizes for environmental public policy, described his time "in the oilfield as a roustabout and roughneck both onshore and off, as well as working for a while for Halliburton when it was still an oilfield service company."

Mayor Lemons also worked in the oil fields during college and high school, mostly on rigs "where you drill down into a big pool of oil offshore." He cited this experience to emphasize that he's not "anti-drilling" or a "running-through-the-woods environmentalist."

"There's a lot of good in oil drilling. The need for energy, I understand that. I'm a practical person. I drive a car and I like it," he said. "But there's a lot bad about it too, some very large environmental issues. You've got to strike a balance, and find the right time and right place, and out there is not the right place."

The mayor added that thanks in part to state laws that give massive tax breaks and incentives for fracking projects, the local community would see little to no financial benefit.

"Most of the equipment is not bought here. Most of the people they'd bring in to do the work are not employed here—they're coming in from contract companies. They set up temporary huts, shelters, so they're not renting," Lemons said. "So we get potential

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polluting of our aquifer, the potential polluting of our air, groundwater pollution, quite a bit of noise pollution, right on our doorstep, and no money coming into Abita Springs. ”

Louisiana’s tax incentive for horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing was passed nearly two decades ago, when the process was still an experimental and risky venture. But now that the controversial technology is widely used, with more than a thousand fracking wells already in production and hundreds more on the way, the waived severance tax is starting to add up. An analysis by The Advocate found that the state has lost more than a billion dollars of revenue in just the past few years, leading groups like the Louisiana Budget Project to blast the tax break and call for its repeal.

For now, residents will continue petitioning the Army Corps of Engineers to reject Helis’ application for a wetland permit and urging the overwhelmingly Republican St. Tammany Parish Council to keep funding its lawsuit against the state for the right to control its own zoning. Arguments in that case were scheduled for early February in Baton Rouge, but could be delayed further.

St. Tammany resident Margie Vicknair said despite Louisiana’s record of deference to oil and gas companies, Louisiana environmentalists will continue to fight such projects when and where they are proposed.

“We are so often written off by others as if we’ve all given up and gone off to party on Bourbon Street,” she said. “We are fighters, though. Our ancestors wouldn’t have lasted through all the muck and mosquitoes and malaria if they hadn’t been fighters. We want to save this place because for us it is a place of peace and beauty.”

Works Cited

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