

Sisters choose nature over riches of natural gas lease

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Dec. 24, 2013 Eco Catholic
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With 761 acres of mostly wooded property nestled along the Ohio-Pennsylvania state line, the Sisters of the Humility of Mary feel they have been entrusted with a special oasis.

The land encompasses a 250-acre organic farm, grazing land for cattle and sheep, wetlands and shaded open space where members of the community, employees and visitors can relax, walk and pray, all to gain a deeper appreciation of creation.

So when the landmen representing the energy companies approached in 2010, 2011 and 2012 with offers of thousands of dollars per acre for the natural gas rights in the shale formations deep below the surface, the sisters stepped back and asked themselves what the land they have nurtured for nearly 150 years really meant to the community.

What they decided was to firmly tell the landmen, "No."

Never mind that some of the sisters' 80 neighbors had readily signed on, likely bringing industrial-scale natural gas mining that uses the controversial slick water hydraulic fracturing process to the congregation's doorsteps.

For now, explained Srs. Barbara O'Donnell and Mary Cunningham, who have been intimately involved in land and environmental concerns for their order, the 2012 decision to forgo signing any lease was the best way to protect the piece of creation the sisters call home.

"We actually spent whole meetings going through the lease piece by piece," O'Donnell recalled. "We had those lawyers work with us at those meetings, going through it piece by piece, enlightening us to what we were saying yes to. And point by point we had to say no because of our belief.

"And because we're a religious congregation, we're not in it for the money. We could have made lots of money and we have things that we could have invested that into. But at this time we just could not say yes to that because the land has sustained us from the time we came here in 1864," she said.

Cunningham told Catholic News Service it was a desire to focus on the "bigger picture" of sustainability for all life that guided the community's decision.

"This is not just a human thing. This is a wildlife habitat that is so healthy. The fear of having anything interrupt that is very serious to us," she said.

Both sisters explained that their community's concern for the environment flows from Scripture and the legacy of saints such as Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Ignatius of Loyola and Bernard of Clairvaux, who often used inspirational images of nature in their writings and teachings.

The community updated its Land Ethic and Principles of Sustainability earlier this year. The idea for the ethic

took root in 1999 as the sisters reconsidered their relationship with the land, but it was not until 2009 when it was formally adopted. The ethic is meant to guide discussions on any potential changes in the use of the property.

The ethic encompasses four principles of sustainability related to the interdependence of all life, simple living and ecological sustainability, the use of natural renewable energies and minimizing waste, and promoting ecological justice and ethical responsibility to all forms of life.

O'Donnell and Cunningham said they believe the practice of hydraulic fracturing -- in which millions of gallons of water mixed with sand and chemicals is injected into the shale to free natural gas and natural gas liquids -- poses serious challenges to the environment despite the energy industry's assurances that environmental and safety regulations are followed.

Industry leaders maintain that the hydraulic fracturing process, also known as fracking, has never contaminated any water supplies in the 66 years since it was developed.

The sisters, however, point to the release of harmful chemicals and hydrocarbons into the air and, at times, the water, noise, bright lights, the massive amounts of truck traffic and the loss of wildlife habitat that scientific studies and homeowners' experiences show is often associated with natural gas extraction.

They are concerned that if fracking comes to nearby properties their water supply may be endangered by the migration of dangerous chemicals and naturally occurring radioactive materials into the aquifer that supplies the motherhouse and farm. The order is in the process of having its water sources tested and follow-up monitoring will become the norm, O'Donnell said.

The sisters said they understand how the attraction of jobs and the money received from leasing rights and royalties can be attractive in a long-suffering part of the country.

"The area is so economically depressed that people are desperate for any kind of work," Cunningham said.

As the landmen were making their rounds, the community sponsored an eight-part educational series on fracking. The programs offered opportunities for the residents to discuss and better understand the mining process, legal issues and environmental stewardship responsibilities.

In the end, the Sisters of the Humility of Mary will continue to seek ways to help neighboring property owners maintain what O'Donnell and Cunningham described as "right relationship with the earth."

"It's about the health of humans. It's about the health of animals. It's about the health of the land. It connects to our food. Are we fracking our food that is grown from the land? Are we fracking our water which we have to drink? These are the sources of sustenance," Cunningham said.

"These are all God-given gifts to all of us."

Editor's Note: *This is the third in a six-part Catholic News Service series examining the practice of hydraulic fracturing for natural gas development and Catholic teaching on the environment. The stories will appear at Eco Catholic semiweekly through Jan. 2. Read the earlier stories: [Part 1](#) [1], [Part 2](#) [2]. For recent NCR coverage on fracking, see "[Sisters of Loretto resist proposed pipeline through Kentucky land](#) [3];" "[Students scrutinize fracking lease at Franciscan University](#) [4]" and "[In global fight against fracking, faith community should lead](#) [5]."*

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