

Christine T. Hughes, owner of Village Bakery, Della Zona, and Catalyst Café
Testimony on “Natural Gas-America’s New Energy Opportunity: Creating Jobs, Energy & Community Growth”
February 24, 2012

Distinguished members of the committee:

Thank you for convening this hearing on a topic that is of urgent concern to all Ohioans. I would like to present a business perspective in the hope that it may illustrate how shale development is currently impacting my business network in Athens, Ohio.

My name is Christine Hughes. My partner and I own 3 food businesses in Athens—Village Bakery, Catalyst Café, and Della Zona—which means “from the region” in Italian. We currently have 25 employees. We make food from locally grown ingredients to sell to our neighbors, to Athens visitors, and to feed our staff. I’ve been concerned for some time now about the shale drilling industry moving in to land surrounding the city, because that’s where our food is grown, and that’s where my farming friends make their living.

I want to briefly tell you about some of the people I’ve done business with for more than 10 years. Some of the checks I write over the course of the week are for:

High Bottom Farm eggs,
Laurel Valley Creamery cheese,
King Family Farm poultry,
Harmony Hollow Farm pork,
Sassafras Farm spinach,
Shagbark Seed and Mill corn,
Cherry and Shews Orchards fruit,
Cantrell honey,
Shade River Farm onions,
Rich Gardens garlic,
Green Edge Gardens lettuce,
Starline Organics flour,
Snowville Creamery milk,
Sticky Pete’s maple syrup,
and several other local food producers. And this is in February.

These checks represent real local businesses, most with additional employees--the larger ones have 12-15 full time employees. At least 70 jobs are directly affected by my business.

There are many dozens more local food producers at the thriving Athens Farmers Market, which is nationally known, and has a 2-year waiting list for vendors.

Some of our local producers have grown to be able to sell to Giant Eagle and Whole Foods, in larger cities including Columbus and Washington DC.

These farmers and producers raise food in a way that ensures that future generations will also be able to produce clean, healthy food. And they teach younger generations how to farm, and how to produce food for their families and communities.

Two years ago the Athens 30 Mile Meal Project began, to increase local food use and promote tourism around local food. This year there are 147 partners in the program (up 68% since August 2011) including farms, CSAs, eateries committed to local sourcing, specialty food producers, and farmers markets.

This year 30 MM will become a national resource for regions seeking to develop and build their local foods economies, promoting the region to travelers interested in experiencing our vibrant local foods experience, resulting in additional demand for hotel rooms, meals, as well as lodging tax revenues.

Together, we have laid the foundation for a sustainable economy by creating a resilient local food system. Resilient, unless, of course, a toxic, poorly regulated industry, funded by unprecedented international speculative investment is escorted into our land, against our will. Small-scale agriculture in Southeast Ohio is about to be terminated by a short-term energy “boom” that is being forced on citizens, 72 percent of whom, despite their hopefulness about economic benefits, want shale drilling stopped until further studies can be completed on it’s potential impacts.

So far in Athens County there have been no wells drilled yet for this new kind of high volume, deep shale, slick water, horizontal fracturing, but several hundred oil and gas leases are under contract to be drilled, beginning this spring according to one drilling company. We do have 4 class 2 injection wells, 2 of which are actively receiving truckloads of waste water from frack jobs in PA, WV, and North of us in Ohio. One of these is just outside Athens City and close to the Hocking River. With the increase of shale drilling endorsed by our State and Federal governments, Ohio can expect to see the volume of fracking waste water trucked in and injected under our land to increase exponentially.

Awareness is growing here about the health effects of living near shale drilling operations. A statement last month from the American Lung Association regarding shale development in New York is one that should apply to Ohio as well. The statement reads in part: “We believe that there is a very real and unacceptable risk that the air emissions will make people sick and shorten the lives of those living in the communities where the extraction will take place.” The speed and forcefulness of shale development has sparked a growing movement to prevent damage from drilling.

In Athens County, watershed scientists, landowners and dozens of volunteers are working together with an EPA certified lab to gather extensive baseline water testing results. Our local chapter of Ohio Ecological Food and Farming Association has unanimously passed a resolution opposing horizontal fracking because they “believe it is imperative to maintain and expand our local food economy that is energy efficient and ecologically responsible.” Patriotic Ohioans are asking why local control has been stolen from us, and why landowners who don’t want the drilling are subjected to it anyway through eminent domain—by multinational companies who are selling the oil and gas to other countries!

Ohioans want to work, and those who are working in our vibrant local food system don't want to lose our jobs. No one has done a study to find out the economic impact of devastating this local food economy: taking away the livelihood of the 70 people my business relies on and shutting down the small farms that serve hundreds of people connected in this web.

Shale drilling and the disposal of its waste products are an imminent threat to my livelihood and others who make a living from using our environment responsibly to feed ourselves. Three percent of the households in my county have signed leases that will allow drilling activity on over 50 percent of the land in our county. None of my suppliers have signed a lease, but many are surrounded by land that is leased. Ohio University and all other public land is also available to drill on, including Ohio's only federal forest land, which is Wayne National Forest. Civic leaders and officials, alerted by a citizen to the BLM auction at the last minute, spoke clearly in opposition to shale drilling being permitted in the Wayne, on public land, because of the risk to aquifers that supply the City of Athens. The "risk to our water supply, community health and local economy" from a practice that is "not strictly regulated and highly accountable" could not be supported by the Athens Wellhead Protection team.

The company that got all the local landowners to sign was dishonest with potential lessors, telling them they do not use chemicals to frack, and that they filter the flowback water to put it back into the drinking supply. They offered tiny per-acre sums to naïve landowners though the value of the minerals was already in the thousands. Landowners who resisted signing were told by their neighbors that if they didn't sign, the company would drill under their property horizontally to extract minerals from them. Shareholders of oil and gas companies are treated with more respect and honesty than the landowners are—the shareholders are required to be told the risks of drilling, while the lessor is not.

Citizen concerns about safety and health have not been fully addressed by authorities. The failure to oversee drilling on public lands, and the absence of punitive fines for violators does not give me confidence that our farmers' health and environment will be protected from the industry's activities. In Ohio, regulations for well-siting and gas flaring for farming areas are weaker than for urban areas.

As the industry gets ready to move forward, many local farmers are trying to figure out what they will do. A handful of examples might give you an idea of their dilemma:

Integration Acres is run by a young family who raise 50 milking does for cheesemaking on a 30 acre pasture. Their neighbor, a wealthy excavator with lots of acreage, has signed a lease for fracking and is eager to place the compressor station at the far end of his property, next to another neighbor who lives on a tiny strip of land in a dilapidated trailer.

"We do not want to lease our land for the Utica Shale," says Neil Cherry of Cherry Orchards, whose neighbors have leased to drillers. "How will we be able to pass our family farm to our children? What should we do now to protect our family and our land?"

Kale and Melanie Linscott, a young, hardworking couple who grow organic vegetables on land that's been in the Linscott family for generations, are struck with grief that their neighbors who own land but do not farm have signed. More than one local lease signer has said, "if the drilling gets bad, I can take the money and move to Florida." That leaves the family next door to live with the effects of drilling.

Angie Starline, of Starline Organics, whose farm is adjacent to the Hocking River, and next to an active class II injection well receiving frack waste water, tells us, "I am not interested in feeding our customers food from a contaminated industrial zone." She and her husband have invested a lot in their farm, money that they will not be able to recoup if they must abandon their land.

Neighbors, even relatives, who have peacefully coexisted for years are now pitted against each other, each standing by his right to earn a living from his land. I cannot imagine a better plan to rip apart a close community than this oil and gas rush, as it affects our farmers and customers.

This is a massive transfer of wealth—the wealth of our air, our land, our water, our infrastructure of interdependent small businesses. All these are being sacrificed, not for the good of our country, not for the well being of the people, but to ensure the profit of a few multinational corporations. Every citizen prefers clean air to breathe and clean water to drink. And most of us want jobs that preserve the highest health and environmental standards for all. We need Local, State, and National leaders who have both the will and the authority to uphold these standards.

No, this is not about reducing our dependence on foreign oil, creating permanent jobs, or making ourselves safe. The climate change denialists are hand in hand with politicians who tell us wars in the Middle East are not about oil, and then in the next breath that extracting that last drop of oil from under our land will keep us from war, make us independent, and keep our energy costs low. The jobs displaced by drilling are not accounted for, not even mentioned in the promise of Ohio's fossil-fuel-funded future.

If you, our elected representatives, are truly interested in securing long-term jobs and energy supplies for the future of our country, then please put these several facts on the same page for a minute: Deep shale hydraulic fracturing in the U.S. could provide our energy for up to 100 years. According to research out this month from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, methane leaking from fracking gas fields is far greater (from 2.3-7.7%) than previously reported (1.6%). Methane contributes to increased temperatures on Earth--that includes our country, by the way. The International Energy Agency's latest report projects that 2017 will be the year we surpass the level of global warming safety. 2017—five years from today, at current levels of fossil fuel use. At the end of 2011, the U.S. Department of Energy reported that levels of greenhouse gasses are higher than the worst-case scenario anticipated just four years ago.

From what science and reality are showing us, our whole planet will be cooked long before that century of shale fuel can be used up. So, yes, fracking can fuel our future—as long as we don't mind measuring our future in seasons rather than in decades.

For jobs that can last more than a decade, that can help us rebuild our economy, sustainable small-scale farming, smart building and retrofitting, low-impact tourism and renewable energy are all worthy of your support. These are the businesses that already support the people of Southeast Ohio, and their success can be duplicated across the country, increasing our security by lessening our need for fossil fuels.

Where fracking has threatened to move in, in other sustainable food-producing regions such as New York, the largest buyers of local food have written statements that they will not purchase food from land surrounded by industrial production of oil and gas. What will happen to Ohio's farmers? Who will grow our food?

These people I describe, with businesses they give their lives to, are practical visionaries who have built a sustainable food system over the last 40 years, with the knowledge that fossil fuels would not last forever. I will do everything in my power to protect my friends and our livelihoods from being destroyed. What will you do to help us? If we do not protect our farmland from fracking, we will eliminate the very infrastructure that can survive and the very teachers that will help us all learn to thrive after this brief era of fossil fuel burning is history.