

The Buried Treasure in My Backyard



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"Dear Landowner" the letter began. "As you may be aware, it is not necessary to have a large amount of acreage to profit from a gas unit...."

Oh no, I thought. The Barnett Shale has finally tracked me down.

Eight years ago my husband and I went house-hunting near Fort Worth, Texas, and discovered a woody middle-class neighborhood where woodpeckers hammered in the trees, hawks keened overhead, and armadillos made cameo appearances. The setting was so bucolic that we overlooked a string of electrical towers that ran along the neighborhood park and bought a home. It wasn't until we moved in and received a safety notice in the mail that we realized a gas pipeline lies 800 feet from our front door, buried under the nearby park and between our neighbors' manicured yards.



Illustration by Jon Krause

About a year ago the area's tone shifted. Heavy trucks began snorting and pawing along roadways and school fields. Steel towers sprang up like amusement park rides. From the city to the suburbs, we saw footprints of the Barnett Shale, the vast gas and rock formation which spans more than 26 trillion cubic feet beneath Texas. Higher natural gas prices and improved off-site drilling technology meant that harvesting this fuel had finally become profitable.

The proof was in my hand. The letter said that if I signed on the dotted line to lease the mineral rights to our quarter-acre plot, a signing bonus of \$6,500 would be ours. Three months' worth of mortgage payments, dangling like bait.

Now, I'm all for found money, but was this really free? Natural gas does burn more cleanly than coal and oil, and you don't have to crush mountains to get it. Although my husband and I recently switched to wind-powered electricity, we did install a gas line a few years earlier, believing it to be an environmentally sound choice for our stove and fireplace. Since then, though, I've discovered unsettling details.

To fracture shale and retrieve the gas, drillers blast millions of gallons of water and industrial chemicals down each well - in a region facing an ongoing water shortage. The fouled water is trucked away to hazardous-waste sites, but some seeps into nearby groundwater. Proof is as close as the local newspaper: one large landowner had 300 trees suddenly die; another rancher's pond caught on fire.

Then there's the non-stop chaos. Drilling machinery and compressors shake, rattle, and roll. If that weren't enough to lower your property values, check out the volatile organic compounds and diesel soot in the air. A Southern Methodist University engineering professor who has been studying the impact of drilling on local air quality told a neighborhood group that Barnett Shale activities could actually double the region's documented air pollution.

If gas drilling were truly benign, I wonder if energy companies would be paying Tommy Lee Jones to saddle up a billboard and urge us, "Let's all get behind the Barnett Shale." Would smiling bicyclists and happy schoolchildren be lining our highways with the caption, "Barnett Shale: Together we all win"? Here's my idea: billboards picturing asthmatic kids sidelined from school sports, toking on inhalers. Just a thought.

So what to do with the gas leasing opportunity? I took the time-honored approach of burying the "Dear Landowner" letter on my desk, hoping it would go away. Then Wall Street took a roller-coaster dive and our bank accounts went into cardiac arrest. "Did you ever call for information about that gas lease?" my husband asked.

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A phone call doesn't obligate us to anything, I rationalized, dialing the number. A cheerful young woman answered and explained that since the original letter was written, times had changed. Natural gas prices had plummeted, and so had our lease offer-by two-thirds. Then she e-mailed a contract so Byzantine it would have cost the entire lease bonus to have a lawyer decipher it.

All in all, a narrow escape. I still worry about paying the mortgage in this economy, but there's always a silver lining. As the drillers' profits go down, so does the temptation to take their offer. Our water and air get a stay of execution. And so does my conscience.

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Wendy Lyons Sunshine writes about the environment, business, and health for Audubon, Sierra, Worth, AARP The Magazine, and other publications. Her work has received a variety of awards, including one from the Society of Environmental Journalis... [READ MORE >](#)

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#1 **Bruce and Karen** Wrote on April 14, 2009 - 17:10

We have had free gas for 20 years from our mineral lease. The little natgas wellhead (4' tall) is nestled behind some evergreens we planted. No oil/brine to spill...overall the negatives amount to nothing when you actually see it. We hooked up the furnace, hot water tank, dryer and cook top to it with wonderful results. No gas bill for hundreds of months helped put the kids through school. No rising prices either. I invest our retirement money in wind farms, hydroelectric too that are quite sustainable ...but the world isn't a perfect place.

Energy from natural gas is tons cleaner than coal. Life is a trade off.

Live a little before you die...

Bruce

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