

Thank a Farmer this Thanksgiving

In this week of Thanksgiving we celebrate the bounty of the earth and the robust harvest delivered by the farmers who serve the land. In Western Pennsylvania we are blessed with an abundance of fertile agricultural land, enough to sustain the population within 120 miles of the cities. Pennsylvania has seven million acres of agricultural lands, about half in Western Pennsylvania. We have 481 organic farms in Pennsylvania, about 10 % of the USDA Certified Organic Farms. In addition there are many other farms practicing sustainable agriculture that have not completed organic certification yet. The National Farmland Trust has identified nearly all of Western Pennsylvania agricultural land as threatened because of the development pressure from urban encroachment, and from gas development. We are losing agricultural land at the rate of 125 acres per day.

The organic certification requires separation from industrial activities and any synthetic substance not specifically authorized for organic use. The National Organic Program (NOP) regulations specify the processes by which organic food may be produced. They do not directly prohibit industrial activity on or near the property, but certified farms could be affected by nearby drilling operations. Primarily, the regulations bar the use of “prohibited substances,” require distinct boundaries and buffers to prevent the unintended application of prohibited substances to the crops or pasture, and require that measures be taken to prevent organic products from contact with prohibited substances. Because the definition of prohibited substances is very broad, including all synthetic substances unless otherwise permitted and selected non-synthetic substances,¹ contact with pollutants from nearby drilling operations, or the lack of appropriate buffers, may jeopardize a farm’s certification. The regulations also require that production practices “maintain or improve the natural resources of the operation, including soil and water quality.”² Again, land application of polluted water may be interpreted as a violation of this section.

Farmers who do not own their mineral rights are especially concerned, as noted by Stephen Cleghorn of Paradise Gardens and Farm: “In our case, at the very least, we would lose for years, if not forever, the 5-10 acres carved out of our farm by a well pad if that happens. If we find our water threatened from above or below, we could see the entire operation decertified, losing our livelihood.” Many farmers have sold or leased their mineral rights without fully understanding the extent of industrial activity that would take place with Marcellus Shale drilling, compared to the older technology associated with shallow well drilling. .

Also of interest is that the National Office of Homeland Security (yes, those guys) have directives to protect our nation’s food production resources from terrorists, disasters and emergencies. Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio are declared as "Critical Food

¹ 7 CFR § 205.105

² 7 CFR § 205.200

shed" which is being touted as a model for the nation.

The gas fracking industry is operating under a federal exemption from the protection the Safe Drinking Water Act provides to communities. In Pennsylvania, the Oil and Gas Act requires that property owners provide access to mineral rights, even if such development compromises their basic livelihood, even if it compromises the community watershed. The contaminants may take years, even decades, to penetrate from the depths to the groundwater, or from surface spills to the groundwater. As citizens we should demand precaution in going forward with Marcellus Shale development. We must insist on preventive actions that can deflect the environmental and health effects evident in other locations where hydraulic fracking has been going on for several years. Is it really our intention to salt the fertile ground as Romans did in ancient times to guarantee the starvation of their enemies?

Choices we are making today directly affect the options available to our grandchildren. What can we do now to preserve the choices available to them and for future generations? We can choose to protect fertile ground, especially organic farms and drinking watersheds, from incursion of contaminants injected to extract natural gas. The abundance of our earth flows from a fragile, living ecosystem, easily poisoned and rendered sterile by carelessness and greed. So, in this Thanksgiving harvest time, thank a farmer!

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With collaboration of Stephen Cleghorn Paradise Gardens and Farm
and Gregory Boulos, Blackberry Meadow Farm