



# The Brief

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## What's all the fuss about shale gas?



Over 600 people rallied at the Legislature on November 23rd to demonstrate their opposition to the government's plan to develop a shale gas extraction industry in the province. Their concerns stem from water contamination, air and noise pollution and serious health problems in other jurisdictions following the development of shale gas extraction. Photo by Stephanie Merrill.

By ARMAND PAUL

When New Brunswick's MLAs returned to the Legislature on November 23rd, they had to wade through a crowd to get into the building. Thirty anti-shale gas groups held a public rally at the Legislature to show our MLAs the growing wave of opposition to the government's plan for developing a shale gas extraction industry in the province. Some of you may wonder why these people are so upset. Well, it's been about a year since most New Brunswickers

first learned about shale gas, and most of them found out about it only when the gas companies came around to begin their explorations.

There was no advance notice from the government, so people were taken by surprise. As folks studied and learned more about the industry and its record elsewhere, surprise turned into alarm, and alarm into anger.

Incensed at the lack of consultation and disclosure by their government, New Brunswick citizens wrote letters to the Premier, to cabinet ministers and MLAs, only to receive formulaic political responses that sounded reassuring but never addressed their real concerns.

In the media and at public community meetings, government statements and the gas companies' talking points were - and continue to be - virtually indistinguishable. Both claim that shale gas extraction can be done safely here, with no damage to people or the environment.

Meanwhile, citizen investigations revealed a growing body of evidence from other jurisdictions of multiple instances of water contamination, air and noise pollution and serious health problems.

When shale gas wells were drilled, people and animals got sick, rivers were polluted, well water was suddenly undrinkable - sometimes even flammable - and property values plummeted.

Arrogant gas companies flouted regulations and denied any responsibility for the problems, and, worse still, governments in those areas turned a blind eye to their citizens' plight and counted their royalty payments.

It seemed as if that disturbing pattern was being imported to New Brunswick, and people in the exploration zones began to feel not just abandoned by their government, but also about to be sacrificed by it on the altar of economic recovery.

Frustrated citizens began to take up signs, and protest rallies sprang up wherever the gas companies held their well-rehearsed open house presentations.

In August, more than a thousand people from all over the province marched through the streets of Fredericton to the legislature to air their opposition to the perceived corporate and government conspiracy to impose this dangerous industry on them regardless of the obvious risks.

Another rally in Moncton drew 600 demonstrators. In August, citizens blockaded seismic testing trucks north of Stanley for two days.

While many other jurisdictions placed moratoriums or outright bans on hydraulic fracturing or fracking, New Brunswick pushed ahead with exploration, even suggesting that social programs might collapse without the expected shale gas royalties.

Much public concern has been focused on fracking, a process that pumps dangerous chemicals into the earth. In the United States, there have been more than a thousand confirmed cases of water contamination linked to the use and handling of hydraulic fracturing fluids.

While fracking is clearly a high-risk gamble, other aspects of shale gas extraction have guaranteed negative effects. Shale gas extraction involves hundreds, even thousands of wells spread across the landscape.

Every well requires more than a thousand trips over country roads by heavy trucks carrying water or other fluids. Traffic quickly wears out roads designed for much lighter use.

Rural retreats resound with the din of traffic and the constant roar of compressors, endless exhaust fumes foul the air, and pristine country vistas are scarred with snaking pipelines and toxic holding ponds. These aren't just possibilities; they are shale gas certainties.

It's hardly surprising that these prospects weigh heavily on the minds of the people who have gathered at the legislature, first on Nov. 19, and again on Nov. 23. After all these months, as negative evidence continues to grow, they feel their government is still minding the budgetary bottom line, instead of representing the long-term best interests of its citizens.

Armand Paul is a writer, editor and project consultant who lives in Durham Bridge.

## Rural communities being bullied on shale gas: researcher

By CHRIS WALKER

Chris Walker interviews Susan Machum, Canada Research Chair on Rural Social Justice at St. Thomas University, about the impact of shale gas on New Brunswick's rural communities.

**Chris Walker:** You have argued that rural communities are disproportionately targeted for government cost cutting because they represent smaller proportions of the population and you characterize this as a form of bullying. Where does fracking fit in all this?

Susan Machum: Bullying occurs when someone with a disproportionate amount of power picks on someone with less power. Right now essential services are being cut in rural communities and these decisions are being made at the provincial level. The rural communities don't get a say in the matter and it is the same with fracking. Who decided that there should be fracking in the province? The provincial government invited these companies to come and explore for natural gas and the people who are going to be most affected have no voice in the decision making process. Therefore, these people have to go and march on the sidewalk and protest in order to try to have a voice. This tells us that rural residents are not equal, they are not treated with respect, and that they will have to stay outside and protest while these important decisions are made without them. For most people, it's kind of obvious that the communities which are going to have these machines in them should be part of the decision making process - but that is not how policy is formed.

**CW:** How do you respond to the argument that rural New Brunswick is poor, underdeveloped, and that fracking, at least in the immediate term, is one way to stimulate rural economic development?

SM: Every time we look for economic growth the resources come out of rural communities. That's true

whether we are looking at Canada, Latin America or Indonesia. It's rural communities that supply the urban centers with everything they need - wood, food, minerals, fuels and so on. The dazzling lights of the city exist because the urban siphons off resources from the rural. If you look at the scholarly work on underdevelopment, the modern day equivalent to the periphery-centre debate is rural-urban relations: the 'underdevelopment' of rural communities is directly linked to urban growth.

**CW:** So what are we going to get if we let these companies come in and exploit our natural resources?

SM: First of all, are they New Brunswick companies? No they're not. So the profits are going to leave the province. Are they going to hire New Brunswick workers? No. They are going to bring in their own workers who are familiar with fracking technology. They will parachute in, and when there are no more resources to extract they will go on their way, leaving a host of environmental and health problems in their wake.


In the end all we will get are some royalties - and where are these royalties going to go? Into the provincial coffers to shore up the budget. Is this money going to be reinvested into rural communities? I can't see it happening. We are told that these communities are a drain on the economy, we can't afford to plow their roads, we can't provide 24-hour medical services, and we can't afford to keep their local schools open. Is it reasonable to expect that these royalties are going to turn things around and save these communities? No. What we are witnessing is a resurgence of the 1960s modernisation model that was prescribed for the 'third world;' it failed then, and it is going to fail now. We don't have new ideas; we just have new resources to exploit.

**CW:** Environment Minister Peter Kent has indicated that the federal government has the power to ban fracking if it were deemed a "significant broad environmental risk." What is your assessment of this?

SM: Governments don't tend to see any kind of business development as an environmental risk. They are concerned with economic growth and expansion. The new UN platform on

sustainable development focuses on "green growth," so it is a growth model but with minor changes. Similarly, when we talk about "clean energy" all we mean is clean at the point of production. In this regard, nuclear energy is considered "clean" - it leaves waste that will be around for generations, it poses massive environmental risk as in the case of Japan, but it is considered "clean."

The whole conversation assumes there can be no discussion about economic goals other than increasing consumption and production. If... (continued on page 2)

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