

Susan Breese Susquehanna County, PA

Before Southwestern Energy began drilling and fracking a natural gas well near Susan Breese's home in Kingsley, PA along Route 92, Breese said, "I was very confident in drinking [my] well water, as well as giving it to my animals."

A few months after drilling began in 2008, many of Susan's neighbors began to notice black sludge in their water, and Susan noted that her own water started appearing cloudy and had developed an oily texture. She called the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and a representative was sent to come test her water.

In October 2008, the DEP representative verbally told her that her barium levels were extremely high, and well above the safe parameters. "I said, 'what can I do about it? How bad is it?' [The DEP representative] said, 'We'll let you know when we get the test results in' – which I didn't get back until June of the next year," Breese explained.

The DEP never retested her water. She finally received the written results from the October 2008 test on May 27, 2009 with a letter reading:

The sample taken from your water well indicated elevated levels of barium and manganese; however, as a result of our investigation and review of the sample analyses, the department is not able to determine that the drilling alteration or the operation of oil and gas wells contributed to the degradation of your water supply. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Michael T. O'Donnell
Water Quality Specialist, Oil and Gas Management Program

Breese said the DEP test results showed her barium level at 4,704 micrograms/liter and her strontium level at 4,388 micrograms/liter. Asked if anyone expressed concern about her water, Breese commented, "The DEP guy said, 'I wouldn't drink it.'"

After receiving the letter from the DEP Breese said, "I felt helpless. Hopeless. Absolutely hopeless. . . They said, 'We are not going to help you.' It's just me up against a giant oil and gas corporation. My water is ruined, my property value is totally done for."

She now relies on an uncontaminated shallow spring near her house for drinking water, but she and her family have to continue to use the contaminated well water for bathing. "I'm hoping that the water isn't affecting us through the showers and the bath," added Breese. "I'm just hoping that."

Susan is one of thirteen plaintiffs in Susquehanna County suing Southwestern Energy for contaminating their drinking water. Susan was at first reluctant to get involved: "I thought, I don't want to get involved in anything. . . [Maybe] things will settle down and all that, but it didn't," said Breese.

In 2010, Susan had her water independently tested, and found that the barium, strontium and manganese were still elevated: 4,640 micrograms of barium/liter and 3,980 micrograms of strontium/liter. And she was not alone. "Nobody in this neighborhood drinks their water anymore," Breese said.

Breese, whose Sioux mother was born on the Rosebud reservation in North Dakota, commented, "I never would have thought that in 2011 I would be getting a taste of the loss and hopelessness of my ancestors."