

Tammy Manning, Franklin Forks, PA

“It’s tragic; it’s just tragic what’s going on”

Tammy Manning’s family moved south to Franklin Forks, Pennsylvania from Halstead, Pennsylvania in November, 2010 after the home they were renting went into foreclosure. A cleaning woman and a carpenter with little job security and family to support, the Mannings quickly realized that because of the fracking boom, they could no longer afford to rent in the area. Buying a property in Franklin Forks became a more practical option. Their new home was 4,000 feet from one multi-well drilling site and 7,000 feet from another.

About a year later, before they’d even finished paying off their house, the water in their house turned dark grey and brown and water began erupting from their well head. Says Manning, “You would hear it begin to hiss, and then the water would spray out three to four feet in a circle around the well.”

When Tammy contacted Franklin Township, they told her to contact the gas company, who asked the DEP and another company to look at their well and test the water and air. The DEP told her that they thought a methane bubble was moving underground and would eventually surface. When it did, more water would erupt from the well, but the problems would mostly end.

That didn’t happen. Instead, two days after Christmas in 2011, the company hired by the natural gas company tested the air in their kitchen and told the Mannings that they could no longer use their propane-fueled kitchen stove. Because of the methane coming out of their kitchen sink a few feet away, the stove could ignite an explosion.

To vent the methane, the Mannings were instructed to keep their bathroom windows open and a fan going while showering—in the middle of winter. The DEP also found that carbon monoxide was coming from the faucet, and that there were heavy metals in their water, but even though they’d been drinking and bathing in that water for months, the DEP “didn’t say anything about illnesses we might get from any of that,” Manning says. Fearing that a well explosion might reach their house, they ran the kitchen tap constantly to vent methane.

Reluctant to shower in dark, polluted water, the Mannings began a plastic camp shower filled with bottled water, and her daughter occasionally took Tammy’s grandchildren to a friend’s house to shower. In the meanwhile, their granddaughter, whose bedroom was above the kitchen, began throwing up every morning. The Mannings thought that she just had a sensitive stomach and was waking up hungry, so kept crackers by her bed.

By March, the methane levels around their well had almost doubled, leading the DEP to ask the gas company to disconnect and vent their well and send a water buffalo, a refillable plastic water tank. A few days before the well was vented, the DEP found that

the air above the well was 82 percent methane—actually too high to cause an explosion. Because the water in the water buffalo is not potable, the Mannings still had to buy bottled water for drinking and cooking. But as soon as they disconnected the well from the house, her granddaughter stopped vomiting.

“There are definitely tensions in the town.”

Manning says that there were casing failures on four out of ten wells at the site 7,000 feet away, and two out of six on the property 4,000 feet away. In an area that “used to be beautiful farmland,” three of the Mannings’ neighbors also have water buffalos, and four neighbors have methane vents on their wells. All of them alongside or downhill from the drilling sites. Despite this, the gas company continued and continues to insist that they have no responsibility. Says Manning, “It’s still under investigation.”

In the meantime, the gas company has done its best to portray the Mannings and fellow impacted residents as crazy, gullible, and mercenary, both in the media and to their neighbors. Explains Manning, “Who’s going to listen to the small farmer when you’ve got a PR person from the gas company?” The gas company called a private town meeting, inviting people who hadn’t had water problems or were pro-gas “to a church to tell them that our problems were caused by the flooding [from heavy rains], that our well is broken.” The Mannings were not invited, but the man who was selling them their house was invited. He has since joined their lawsuit against the gas company to recoup some of the value of their home.

“I would love to stay, but we don’t want to stay at the cost of our health.”

With money sunk in the house and rents elevated across the area, the Mannings can’t afford to move to a house with running water and no methane. Even if they could, it’s not a welcome solution. “Our roots are all in this area,” says Manning, and their granddaughter likes her school.

Despite her family’s own suffering and gas companies’ insistence that anyone claiming harm or danger from fracking is selfishly obstructing prosperity, Manning takes a larger view of her situation. “I just wish people would look into the renewable resources more,” she says. “I wish my grandchildren would have an earth to inherit.”