Fighting Off a Petrochemical

BY DHARNA NOOR

When she moved back to northern Pennsylvania from California, Lisa Bower-Bjornson knew that her community was not prepared for the impact of a petrochemical plant on her region and to remind people that our health and our well-being are precious. She was not alone.

Across the state, people are feeling the effects of the petrochemical industry. In Pennsylvania, the oil and gas industry has been growing for years, but the pace has accelerated since the Marcellus Shale was discovered in 2008. The industry has brought jobs, but also pollution and health problems.

The petrochemical industry is a powerful political and economic force in Pennsylvania, and it is not always easy to resist. But there are many who are fighting back.

Lois Lynch is a resident of Indiana Township in Washington County, southwest Pennsylvania. She is part of a coalition that is fighting against the construction of a petrochemical plant. Lynch and her fellow organizers were not able to shut down the well pad, but they did win more protective ordinances for the township, which means that future drilling will be more regulated.

Bower-Bjornson, field organizer for Clean Air Council, who lives in Washington County, says that even some residents who are skeptical of the fossil fuel industry are seeing the benefits of the movement for a healthier environment. “We are often prepared to trade our health for jobs,” says Lois Lynch. “That’s what we run up against. And it’s not fair.”

There are other health impacts to worry about too. Used fracking fluids, for example, can contaminate drinking water and underground aquifers. This can lead to an increase in thyroid disease, liver problems, and other health issues.

There are other regions that are struggling with the petrochemical industry as well. In West Virginia, White, who lives in Kanawha County, says that this approach also includes increasing concern about the climate crisis. “We need to think bigger by advocating for a total ban on a petrochemical fuel industry,” he says.

Despite the challenges, a small yet vibrant movement in southwest Pennsylvania is working to protect the environment and the health of their communities. They are fighting for a sustainable future, where neither communities nor materials are wasted.

In the roughly 15 years since fracking first came to Appalachia, gas companies have drilled over 27,000 wells. This has led to an increase in health problems, including exposure to radiation and cancer. In addition, the fracked gas from these wells is being used to make plastic.

“People are attempting to use both naked-eye observations and low-cost monitors to track pollution to ensure Shell is complying with regulations,” says Dustin White, a senior campaigner on plastics and fuels.

In the last two years, there have been multiple protests at the Ohio River Valley, the potential for these sorts of petrochemical plants to be built. The movement is not working to make the Ohio River Valley into a plastic hub, but rather to keep it free from the petrochemical industry.

As activists continue to fight against the petrochemical industry, they are also thinking about the future of their region. They are thinking about the Ohio River Valley and the potential for these sorts of plants to be built. They are thinking about the future of their children and grandchildren.

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