

Testimony – Karen Elias

Above our heads, under the dome of the Capitol Rotunda, is a mural called “The Spirit of Light” designed by artist Edwin Austin Abbey around 1910 to celebrate Pennsylvania's oil industry. It depicts a group of women in white diaphanous gowns, carrying lighted torches, all wafting gently upward on the rising winds of progress. The background features the distinctive lattice-work of the oil derricks that the state was becoming known for early in the 20th century, and behind them the blaze of burning fossil fuels. The fact that this mural was commissioned for the state's capitol says a lot about what Pennsylvania claims as its origin story. But capitalizing on the fact that oil was discovered here back in 1859, and working over the subsequent decades to secure its place as an “energy leader,” has proved disastrous for our state. Given what has occurred over those decades, and what is still occurring today, “The Spirit of Light” must be seen as a symbol of misplaced hope, a gross romanticizing of an ugly reality, and a downright lie.

This People's Hearing today is a remarkable opportunity for residents across the Commonwealth to share our stories of all the ways we are being imperilled by the oil and gas industry as it places fracking wells as close as our own backyards, as it draws millions of gallons of water from our streams and rivers for its dirty operations, as it riddles our landscape with injection wells and pipeline trenches and compressor stations and drilling rigs, as it releases polluting gases into our atmosphere, as it causes certain harm to our health and well being. The list goes on.

Clinton County, where I live, seems in some ways to be the land that time forgot. But look more closely and you'll find evidence everywhere of past industrial malfeasance – toxic chemicals buried in leaking tanks that are still today contaminating the Bald Eagle Creek, acid-mine leakage that turns our waterways a bright orange, high aluminum levels in previously precious fishing areas, and at least one seriously contaminated brownfield that has languished for years without remediation. On top of all this, we sit directly above the Marcellus Shale play, and that “resource” continues to prove irresistible to the area's die-hard capitalists.

We have only just recently escaped the siting in Renovo of what would have become the state's fourth-largest industrial polluter of greenhouse gases – a gas-fired power plant planned for location right in town, only blocks away from residents' homes. Employing the tired come-on that the plant would create much-needed jobs, but without educating or engaging this Environmental Justice community in necessary dialogue, the planners laid the groundwork for the project behind closed doors and then announced it as a virtual fait accompli. The struggling community, in desperate need of a lifeline, fell for it. The leaders of the tiny resistance group that managed to see through the fairy-tale promises have received constant heckling, had their car keyed, found drug paraphernalia dumped in their yard – and one woman was spat upon as she offered her hand in greeting to a speaker at a local fund-raiser.

This past April – in apparent response to the legal appeal launched by the Clean Air Council, Penn Future, and the Center for Biological Diversity -- Bechtel, the developer, pulled out of the project. It's not clear where the hydra-headed monster will crop up next. But our eyes are on a two-billion-dollar “gas synthesis” plant being planned for a 7000-acre tract in northwest Clinton County. This plant proposes to use the methane in fracked gas as a feedstock to produce a range of products, including blue hydrogen, ammonia, urea, and nitrogen fertilizer, thereby maintaining fossil gas production in the state for several decades.

It's amazing to be alive at this moment of crisis, fighting with everything we've got to turn the ship around. It sometimes feels impossible. My deep-red county has elected Stephanie Borowicz twice to serve as our representative. At the first breakfast event she hosted after being elected, I noticed signs at every table announcing that the breakfast was being sponsored by oil and gas. But then I look around here today and see so many people who have not been fooled by the smoke screens or the downright lies – often as a result of experiencing a great deal of pain – and it gives me hope, and courage, and determination, to carry on.

