

Fracking Our Thanksgiving Feast by Joel Greeno (November 2012)

My family has raised dairy cows on our farm in Monroe County near Kendall, Wisconsin, for almost 150 years. We've weathered the Great Depression, low milk prices, droughts, floods, and snowstorms. Despite difficulties, the dairy and related industries generate \$26.5 billion in revenue, 174,000 jobs, and fresh, healthy milk, cheese and butter to the state each year.

Other local families have harvested cranberries for generations. Wild berries are native to our marshlands, and cranberries are the state's largest fruit crop. They supply \$350 million and 7,200 jobs to our state's economy, and almost 60 percent of the US total harvest. My farm is just a few miles from the town of Warrens, the center of Wisconsin's cranberry country and home of the world's largest cranberry festival, with over 140,000 visitors this year. Thanksgiving wouldn't be the same here or anywhere else if our cranberry crop vanished.

Mining Wisconsin's high-quality sand is another industry that's been established for some time. However, the recent spike nationwide in hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, for natural gas and oil has boosted demand for the sand the process requires. If all 86 planned facilities for the state are built and mined, they would account for about 2,800 jobs. Those jobs would be helpful but hardly remarkable or sustainable. The sand will eventually be depleted; then what?

Mining companies are offering farmers in Monroe and neighboring counties millions of dollars for their land, and a number of them have sold. I can't really blame them - that's more money than most dreamed of making in a lifetime - but the consequences are horrific.

Extracting sand on a wide scale would convert thousands of acres of our countryside into open pit mines. Each oil or gas fracking well can use as much as 3 million pounds of sand - 1,500 tons - before it's tapped out. And there are thousands of these wells nationwide.

In addition to the loss of productive farmland, fracking uses huge amounts of water. Cranberry bogs are meticulously designed to take advantage of water stored in the marshes and growers generally set aside seven acres of land for every acre planted to store water for harvesting. Marshes surrounded by sand pits will eventually lose water as it seeps into the pits, leaving growers high and dry.

Sand mining also poses a serious risk of groundwater contamination, further threatening the lives and livelihoods within rural communities. Heavy truck traffic leads to congestion, overburdens the roads and amplifies road noise, damaging the overall quality of rural life.

Once farms are destroyed, it's pretty hard to rebuild them, just as it's hard to bring farmers back to the land once they leave. Farmers here shouldn't have to choose between diametrically opposed options - continue farming at a loss by incurring more debt or selling their farms to be converted into sand pits to relieve debt.

Many of these farmers wouldn't consider selling their land if they saw a real future in farming, and the future depends on a fair price for their products. The people providing food and beverages for every meal deserve a living wage. The small number of short-term jobs that large-scale sand mining might create just doesn't justify destroying our food supply, farmers' livelihoods, and rural communities.

Extracting sand, oil or other finite resources means that eventually the mined land will be worth nothing. Mining companies will move on, taking the jobs and leaving scarred landscapes and empty houses.

On the other hand, if farmers receive a fair price from the buyers of their product, especially renewable ones such as cranberries, butter or milk – local businesses thrive, schools and other infrastructure are supported, and future generations of farmers have real opportunities. So pay farmers fairly and they'll keep producing good products. Everyone can enjoy a good meal, and farms and rural communities won't be turned into sand pits. We would all be grateful for that.

Note: Joel serves on the National Family Farm Coalition's board and executive committee from American Raw Milk Producers Pricing Committee and as board president of Family Farm Defenders. As of October 2013, the Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey reports more than 100 frac sand mines and processing plants in western and central Wisconsin (<http://wisconsin geological survey.org/pdfs/frac-sand-factsheet.pdf>).

.