Fervent foes devote their lives to fracking fight

MARY ESCH, Associated Press

VESTAL, N.Y. (AP) -- Big energy companies have been trying for five years to tap the riches of the Marcellus Shale in southern New York, promising thousands of new jobs, economic salvation for a depressed region, and a cheap, abundant, clean-burning source of fuel close to power-hungry cities. But for all its political clout and financial prowess, the industry hasn't been able to get its foot in the door.

One reason: Folks like Sue Rapp and Vera Scroggins are standing in the way.

Rapp, a family counselor in the Broome County town of Vestal, in the prime shale gas region near the Pennsylvania border, is intense and unrelenting in pressing her petitions. Scroggins - a retiree and grandmother who lives across the border in hilly northeastern Pennsylvania, where intensive gas development has been going on for five years - is gleefully confrontational. She happily posts videos of her skirmishes.

The anti-fracking movement has inspired a legion of people like Rapp and Scroggins- idiosyncratic true believers, many of them middle-aged women, who have made it the central mission of their lives to stop gas drilling using high-volume hydraulic fracturing in the Marcellus region that underlies southern New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia.

They are not necessarily popular; they have been shunned by former friends who support drilling and the economic benefits it brings. Their opponents accuse them of distorting the truth about fracking's impacts by insisting that their communities and surrounding countryside will be transformed into a polluted industrial wasteland if natural gas interests have their way.

But many of those same opponents acknowledge that Rapp, Scroggins and others like them have been effective.

"There's no denying that their actions have had an impact," said Jim Smith, spokesman for the Independent Oil and Gas Association of New York. "If they weren't doing what they're doing, we would have been through with this a long time ago. They're wrong on the facts but they're very loud and very vocal, and that gets noticed for political reasons."

Their cause is amplified by an extensive coalition - including deep-pocketed environmental groups, New York City lawyers, organic farmers, doctors, paid professional activists and celebrities - that has waged a relentless campaign urging Gov. Andrew Cuomo to ban fracking. The Democratic governor continues to delay his decision, leaving drillers and landowners with leases in limbo since 2008. That's when the state launched a study of the environmental impact of fracking, which frees gas from shale a mile or so underground by injecting chemically treated water and sand into a horizontal well bore.

While Rapp and Scroggins are among the more visible of the grassroots fracking foes, their motivations and personal styles are different.

"I don't have a political agenda. I just want to preserve the quality of life for myself and my neighbors," Rapp said as she had lunch with Scroggins at the Vestal Diner.

Thin and birdlike with curly red hair, Rapp is a leader in the so-called "home rule" movement, which has led more than 100 communities to enact bans or moratoriums against fracking. The gas industry has challenged the legality of such bans but has lost two cases which it plans to appeal to the state's highest court.

Rapp devotes her free time to organizing letter-writing campaigns to the governor, gathering signatures on petitions, and trying - unsuccessfully - to get her town board to enact a fracking ban or pass road-use laws aimed at the convoys of water and gravel trucks heading for Pennsylvania's drilling sites.

She campaigned last fall for anti-fracking candidates. But in her county and others in the border region where drilling is most likely to start if Cuomo gives it the green light, all were defeated.

"I have two petitions, the road petition and the ban petition," Rapp said. "I knock on doors, I go to farmers markets and the rail trails. I don't think of myself as an activist or an environmentalist; this is just something I have an enormous commitment to."

In contrast, Scroggins relishes the label of activist. A short, stocky woman with long silver hair and loose T-shirt, Scroggins is a scrappy, in-your-face videographer and self-appointed guide to the gas patch of northeastern Pennsylvania, where she lives in a single-wide trailer near a lake.

She has given tours to state and local politicians, community groups, and anti-fracking celebrities such as Yoko Ono, Sean Lennon and Susan Sarandon. Several days a week, she drives people around to show them drilling sites, pipelines, compressor stations, and truck-worn roads. She introduces them to residents of Dimock and Franklin Forks who believe their well water was ruined by drilling operations - even though state and federal investigators couldn't confirm all the complaints. She records the tours on video.

She also records town board meetings, often raising the ire of people who'd rather not be in the videos she posts online by the hundreds.

"Basically what I show is, `Do you want this near your home?'" Scroggins said, standing on a road beside a well site with a rumbling compressor station, tanks, pipes, and other equipment. There are 700 gas wells in Susquehanna County; 38 percent of the county is under lease, and gas companies indicate a potential of 3,000 drilling locations.

Gas industry bloggers have mocked Scroggins, but she clearly relishes her

notoriety. On a recent tour, she flagged down the SUV of a gas company's new security guards and introduced herself.

"I'm the tour guide. I'm sure you've heard about me," Scroggins said. When the guards said they hadn't, Scroggins told them about her frequent tour groups and said she's often tailed by security details and shooed away from drilling sites.

Many of the farmers and other landowners who are getting royalty checks from the gas wells on their land don't welcome the self-appointed guide to the gas patch. Some have signs in their yards saying "Our water's fine" and "My gas well pays my mortgage."

Scroggins takes it in stride. Rolling slowly down the road, she waved and smiled at a woman glowering in a front yard. "She hates me," Scroggins said.

Victor Furman, head of a pro-gas landowners' group in New York's Chenango County, said Rapp and Scroggins are part of a "fringe group" that relies on emotion rather than science to build opposition.

"They hold meetings that are full of lies and misinformation," said Furman, a retired technical writer for IBM. "They do have some legitimate concerns, but they don't want to talk about the mitigations to address those concerns," such as storing fracking wastewater in closed tanks instead of open ponds and requiring multiple layers of well casing to protect ground water.

The industry-funded Energy In Depth sometimes sends its own camera-toting representatives to tail Scroggins' tours and rebut what she says. The group posted video on its website of Scroggins shouting personal insults and obscenities at Phelim McAleer, a pro-fracking filmmaker who tried to talk to Ono and Sarandon during their January tour. McAleer tried to tell them the Environmental Protection Agency had determined the drinking water in question was safe, not contaminated by drilling.

"I admit that I lost it that day," Scroggins said. "It wasn't my finest hour."

Yet, she posted her own video of the encounter online.

While drilling hasn't come to New York, Rapp said the industry has already changed community life.

"They've fractured our communities," she said. "You can't go to the grocery store or anywhere else without everybody knowing where everyone stands. It's not the same place anymore and we don't even have drilling yet."

"You get ostracized, maligned," Scroggins said. "But I'm dealing with all that."

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