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Environmental complaint filed on Oregon Township drill site

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A local environmental watchdog has filed a complaint with the state Department of Environmental Protection urging the government agency to conduct an investigation into the "potential" release of pollutants from a natural gas drill site in Oregon Township.

By Steve McConnell

A local environmental watchdog has filed a complaint with the state Department of Environmental Protection urging the government agency to conduct an investigation into the "potential" release of pollutants from a natural gas drill site in Oregon Township.

Filed by a lawyer representing Damascus Citizens for Sustainability, the nine-page complaint is based on aerial and ground photographs taken in July, August and September providing circumstantial evidence "that fluid materials containing substances that may be toxic ... may have been released from this site killing several trees" in the nearby vicinity.

In an inquiry by *The Wayne Independent* after the newspaper obtained the complaint, Chesapeake Appalachia denied any improprieties at its Fox Hill Road site, the company's first and thus far only drilled well in Wayne County.

"A detailed review of our operations at the ... property reveals no events or operational deficiencies that would negatively impact the environment," said company executive Brian Grove, who is based in Bradford County. "We have interacted several times with DEP (state Department of Environmental Protection) throughout the active and post-drilling phases of the project, including on-site inspections, all of which found the operation to be in compliance with all applicable environmental regulations."

The company, which began site work in April, lasting throughout the summer, was reportedly targeting a deep-underground shale formation called the Oriskany.

In an aerial photograph shot on August 30, there is clearly a direct line of completely leafless trees, with some faded brown, beginning close to one corner of the drill pad and extending quite a distance into the woods. Except in this area, other trees around the site and in the surrounding countryside are fully green. Essentially, the complaint alleges that it is plausible a harmful fluid flowed downhill off one corner of the site into the wooded area - causing damage to the foliage.

Natural gas drill sites often have chemicals stored on-site, sometimes in waste-disposal pits, that can be detrimental to the environment if not properly contained.

"I was the person who took the aerial photography of the ... well site, and it is very clear ... that there is 'contaminated runoff' from the ... drilling pad" based on the photographs, said Pat Carullo, a spokesperson for Damascus Citizens for Sustainability. "I define 'contaminated runoff' - as any flow runoff that causes either death or destruction in its path."

A ground-level photograph taken one month later in September shows "the first and largest of the dead trees ... closest to the pad site," according to the complaint along with leafless trees behind it, flanked by a sea of green. Revealing when that tree and those directly behind it began defoliating, a July 22 ground photograph clearly shows a cluster of brown, shriveled-leafed trees, while the surrounding foliage has held as seasonally expected. "These images along other close-up photos taken from the ground will be used in an upcoming litigation regarding these industry practices within the watershed," said Carullo, whose organization has been the local muckraker for all things related to natural-gas extraction in the Delaware River Basin which includes most of Wayne County. The complaint, filed October 5, has drawn the attention of DEP. But the agency has thus far found the company not responsible for any environmental impact or contamination that may have resulted in the death of nearby trees, said spokesperson Mark Carmon on Wednesday. "The trees in the photo lost their leaves earlier than the surrounding area but there were no signs of a surface-related spill or impact around them and the trees did not appear to be dead or dying," said Carmon. Soil and water sampling in the area has not been conducted, however, and this initial finding is based on a visual review by a DEP inspector in late September and other previous inspections prior to the filing of the complaint. "We are still investigating ... but nothing has been determined one way or another," said Carmon. "It is still an active and open investigation on our part." DEP inspections in June and July, along with the late September visit, did not find any environmental violations at the Oregon Township site, according to the agency's records and interviews. The complaint, however, urges DEP to "collect and analyze soil and surface water samples from the area of the tree kill ... to determine whether contaminants have been released from this site." This has yet to be done, however. Grove, of Chesapeake, said that although the company operated the Oregon Township site properly they will be "conducting some follow up environmental tests, as well as consulting with appropriate experts to review the data and provide an independent analysis." "To this, we will be working proactively with the appropriate regulatory agencies to fully and accurately account the facts of this matter and take appropriate action, if needed," he added. Chesapeake Appalachia, the West Virginia-based subsidiary of Chesapeake Energy, has the second-largest leasehold

in Wayne County, giving the company the right to explore and possibly drill for natural gas on private property here.

The complaint was also filed with the Delaware River Basin Commission, which has environmental jurisdiction of the natural gas industry in Wayne County.