

The Mines That Fracking Built

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By *Mike Ludwig, Truthout | Report*



A frac sand mine near Cooks Valley, Wisconsin. (Photo: Mike Ludwig)

This story is the first installment of Truthout's Fracking Road Trip series on the wide-reaching impacts of the fracking industry.

The bluffs rise up gently from the rolling hills and farmlands of Wisconsin's Chippewa County. For years, the bluffs stood silent as small farming communities grew around them. The bluffs are too steep to farm and most of the trees in the area grow on the tops of bluffs and around their rolling slopes and steep faces. It's unusually cold for April and trees stand as silhouettes against a layer of snow.

This scene is quickly interrupted at the intersection of two county roads in the small township of Cooks Valley. A large bluff behind a farm has disappeared. The bluff has been blasted, churned up and turned into giant piles of sand. The sand will soon be trucked off to a processing plant, loaded back into trucks or perhaps onto a waiting train and then shipped to oil and gas fields in other states.

The sand will be mixed with water and chemicals and forced deep underground to break up rock and release precious fossil fuels. This isn't the kind of sand you find at the beach; it's silica, or "frack sand," a carcinogenic dust and a key ingredient in the hydraulic fracking process which has facilitated a nationwide natural gas boom and, according to opponents, an ongoing environmental crisis. Silica particles are uniquely shaped and prop open fractures in the underground rock to free the oil or gas.

Cooks Valley may be far from the oil and gas fields, but like the rural neighborhoods in states where fracking rigs and gas pipelines have replaced pastures, the frack industry's demand for natural resources has pitted neighbor against neighbor and turned this once tight-knit community upside down.

In the Shadow of the Mine

Jane Sonnentag is a busy woman. Several children bounce around her humble kitchen as she holds her youngest child and laughs as she recalls her father advising her not to marry a farmer. She did not take his advice, and now Sonnentag and her husband Louis are raising seven children on their 160-acre farm nestled between the rising bluffs of Cooks Valley. Sonnentag has lived in the area all her life and her family has farmed there for generations. Her farm, she says, is a "little piece of heaven." But Sonnentag's farm is not as heavenly as it used to be.



A frack sand processing plant in Maiden Rock, Wisconsin. (Photo: Mike Ludwig)

Since 2011, when a massive, out-of-state energy firm won a permit to set up shop in their neighborhood, the Sonnentags have lived in the shadow of a 234-acre frac-sand mine located on the bluffs behind their farm and home. Sonnentag explains that as many as 400 trucks, laden with silica sand or wastewater from a sand-processing plant, may roll past their home in a day. "I've got 400 trucks and seven kids and a yard this size ... it's not fun, you know, being by a stop sign, really," says Sonnentag. "It's like David verses Goliath, except I don't have a slingshot."

For generations, mom-and-pop-sized mines in Wisconsin have supplied silica for a variety of purposes, ranging from water filtration to road paving. But in recent years, the industry has grown exponentially as the fracking boom in other states such as North Dakota, Ohio and Pennsylvania has increased the demand for silica across the country. Big mining and energy companies have swooped into rural communities like the Sonnentag's to expand existing mines and break ground on massive new ones, turning Wisconsin's western bluffs into giant piles of sand and its rural towns into centers of sand shipment and processing. There are now 70 active mines operating in Wisconsin, along with dozens of processing facilities. Three mines, each more than 100 acres in size, are currently operating within miles of Sonnentag's home in Cooks Valley, a small township of less than 1,000 people.

EOG Resources, a massive energy firm [and former Enron subsidiary](#) (known at the time as Enron Oil and Gas), operates the mine near the Sonnentags' home. The company's local office told Truthout to contact its Houston office for comments on the mine and its impacts on nearby farms, but a representative there failed to respond to several inquiries.

When EOG Resources was blasting apart the bluffs, Sonnentag says, the shock would shake her house. Once a blast knocked her to the floor. At times, dust from the mining operations would invade their farm. EOG Resources would dispatch a couple of water trucks every hour to wet down the dust and keep it out of the air, but the effort was "like taking a thimble to a dust bowl." With dust blowing in the wind and hundreds of trucks passing their house everyday, the Sonnentags became increasingly concerned about their health. "There were not a lot of days we could go outside, because we have two kids who have asthma," Sonnentag says.

Silica dust is a known carcinogen and [has been linked to lung disease and cancer among workers](#), and the federal government has set limits on silica exposure for the workplace - but has not set limits on public exposure. The frack sand industry in Wisconsin routinely assures the public that airborne silica poses no proven dangers to the public, but without any federal or state regulation of exposure, the industry's assurances do little to ease Sonnentag's mind. What if silica is the next asbestos, she wonders? Her family never signed up to be "test dummies." And what about the water? Pointing toward the mine, Sonnentag says

that EOG Resources is currently trucking wastewater from its sand-processing plant, where the sand is treated with water and chemicals, and dumping it back into the mine. "I always thought my kids would want to live here long after we're gone, but now I don't know. There might not be any air to breath and water to drink."

Regulators Stretched Thin

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) regulates sand mines as "nonmetallic mines," a class that includes the small gravel pits and limestone mines that have long operated throughout the state. Tom Woletz, the DNR point person on frack sand, tells Truthout that DNR has regulated sand mines in this way for years, but now the frack-sand rush has brought much larger mines to the state. "The fugitive dust, that is a potential problem, and that's what people are concerned about," Woletz says.

DNR requires mine operators to monitor silica dust emissions and report them to the state, but DNR officials rarely visit the mines in person. Federal funding requires the agency's limited staff to focus on major sources of air pollution such as large metallic mines.

"Some of these mines are never going to see a DNR air inspector at all unless there is a complaint," says Woletz. "We could use more people on the ground to make sure that these people are doing the appropriate things." A state budget proposal could add two more compliance officers to the DNR staff, and Woletz says DNR could always use more people. But much of the responsibility to keep silica out of the air in rural neighborhoods falls on the industry, he says, and DNR can't always be there to hold its hand. "There's some really good [operators] out there, and there's some that have a ways to go," he says.

In 2012 alone, the DNR issued violations to at least 15 frack-sand operators in the state, according to state records.

Under state rules, a mine located near a child care center or a neighborhood operates under the same pollution standards as a mine located in the middle of a forest, according to Woletz. In many cases, it's up to the county or local government to regulate trucking, mine locations and land use. With some residents supporting local measures to protect their homes and farms and other residents eager to cash in on the sand rush, local controversies over sand mine regulation have created brutal divisions in communities that would otherwise be models of Midwestern neighborliness.

"There are family members up in Chippewa County that may never talk to each other again, ever," Woletz admits.

That's a familiar story to Sonnentag, who was involved in a local push to regulate the sand mines in Cooks Valley under a local ordinance that was opposed by local landowners, including her neighbors. "Sand has dictated everything in this town ... pitted neighbor against neighbor," she says. The best man at her wedding will no longer talk to her. He wanted to start a mine on his land, Sonnentag says, and saw her family and other supporters of the ordinance as standing in his way.

"It's unfortunate, because he's no closer to getting that mine started than I am to becoming a vegetarian," Sonnentag says with a grin.

A Fractured Community

Sleet is turning the snow to ice outside of Sonnentag's house, but her kitchen, busy with young children arranging pots and pans on the floor, is warm and cozy. Sonnentag chats with Victoria Trinko, who lives a few miles up the road on a small farm located across the street from a frack sand mine. The two women are discussing the local politics surrounding the ordinance they fought for years to put in place in order to regulate the sand mine operations.

"It's really split our community apart," Trinko says.

Earlier that morning, Trinko had returned to her home after volunteering at a Sunday pancake breakfast. She says the turnout was good considering the cold weather and a bit of friendly competition from another pancake breakfast at a local church. She takes a seat in her living room, where she has agreed to be

interviewed by Truthout. A picture of her daughter, who is now studying abroad, hangs above the mantle. The conversation quickly turns to sand.

Trinko is the Cooks Valley Board clerk and kept notes on the battle over the ordinance, which was first drawn up and passed in 2008 after residents learned that sand mines might open in the neighborhood. The ordinance addressed noise from blasting, hours of operation, silica dust control and the number of trucks allowed to rumble down the roads.

Landowners who wanted to lease their properties to mining companies or open their own mines quickly hired a lawyer and sued the town to defeat the ordinance. It amounted to a "zoning ordinance" and was not properly filed with the county, they argued, and a local judge agreed.

"So we appealed," Trinko says, "and that made them all angry."

What followed was three years of litigation and showdowns in the local town hall. At one point, the town board was accused of embezzlement; at another, the pro-mining landowners tried to take over the board and dismiss Cooks Valley's [village powers](#), which, under state law, grant the township the authority to pass ordinances.

"It's gotten really, really nasty," Trinko says.

Neighbors have sued neighbors, and Trinko herself was sued (along with two board supervisors) over open records laws. Meanwhile, the town board continued to appeal the challenge to the mining ordinance, which eventually landed at the Wisconsin Supreme Court. As clerk, Trinko had been keeping notes throughout the whole fiasco, and eventually, she had to hand them over to the highest court in the state.

"I was very proud of myself, I guess, or satisfied, that my paperwork held up in the [Wisconsin] Supreme Court," Trinko says with a smile.

In 2012, the Wisconsin Supreme Court reversed an appeals court decision and ruled in favor of the Town of Cooks Valley, and the township was finally allowed to begin enforcing the regulations it originally passed in 2008. As the battle over the ordinance wove its way through the courts, however, three mines were established in Cooks Valley, including those near the Trinko and Sonnentag farms. To date, the township has only completed the permitting process for one mine under the ordinance. A draft permit prepared by the township for the EOG Resources mine includes mandatory air monitoring and a \$112,500 fee to be paid to the Sonnentag family, so they can build a new house, across the street and farther away from the mine's trucking route.

For Trinko, the matter of sand mining continues to be a big part of daily life. As town clerk, she receives permit notices and posts them in public places such as the local bar. But there are more personal issues as well. In 2011, after the mines began digging into the bluffs, Trinko said she could "chew on dust" when working outside her house. Soon she would have a sore throat, but not the cold that usually accompanies it. She says the symptoms disappear when she travels to visit relatives in other states.

Trinko now believes she has developed asthma from living near the sand mines. She saw a breathing specialist who told her that the breathing problems were related to her living environment, but the specialist refuses to go on the record with reporters due to the ongoing controversy.

Trinko says her daughter is worried the air pollution may be shortening her life, but she wants to stay on her farm. It has been in her family since her father bought it in 1936. Trinko points out the window to a bluff rising beyond the next pasture.

"That bluff ... that's where my dad grew up," Trinko says. Frack-sand mining and processing continues nearby, and another facility in the area is under development. "It would be very sad to see all the trees disappear. Plus, I am breathing this stuff."

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