

Fracking in Wayne National Forest: A Hazardous History, a Dangerous Future

In December 2016, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service opened up the Wayne National Forest to large-scale, high-volume fracking of the Marcellus and Utica shale for the first time, approving a plan to lease 40,000 acres of national forest to oil and gas companies.

The Wayne is Ohio's only national forest. The lease plan will allow much of it to be industrialized.

History of contamination

Many of the publicly owned lease parcels are near the Ohio River and its tributaries. These waters will be at risk of contamination from fracking chemicals and wastewater transported by trucks and pipelines, as well as runoff pollution from new roads, gathering lines and well pads.

Fracking near the Wayne has already contaminated streams and harmed wildlife, including endangered species. Here's a history:

- In June 2014, the Eisenbarth well pad in Monroe County near the national forest boundary caught fire, resulting in 54,000 gallons of hazardous fracking chemicals and 300,000 gallons of fire retardants washing into a tributary of the Ohio River. The runoff killed 70,000 fish along a 5-mile stretch of the river.
- In May 2014, a well head failure caused 100 barrels of drilling mud to spill into a creek near Beverly, Ohio, contaminating the creek with the drilling mud, crude oil, and condensate. The creek is connected to the Muskingum River, a tributary of the Ohio River.
- In March 2016, a truck hauling drilling wastewater overturned in eastern Ohio, sending thousands of gallons of toxic water into a nearby creek and contaminating a drinking water reservoir in Barnesville in Belmont County. The wastewater came from a well in Monroe County.
- In April 2017, an estimated 2 million gallons of drilling fluid spilled from the Rover Pipeline in two separate incidents near Richland and Stark counties.

Threats to water, endangered species

Increased injection of fracking wastewater also poses a risk to groundwater in a state with some of the weakest safeguards against toxic wastewater injection. Ohio is already a dumping ground for oil and gas wastewater from surrounding states.

New leasing would also threaten imperiled species such as the Indiana bat and tri-colored bat. These species are already over-stressed by existing habitat fragmentation,

white-nose syndrome and climate change. Habitat destruction, deadly wastewater pits and water contamination from fracking activities will compound these threats.

Community opposition

Adjacent landowners have pressured the Forest Service to open up public land in the Wayne National Forest for hydraulic fracking to make their privately owned minerals commercially valuable for oil and gas exploitation. However, doing so would jeopardize publicly owned resources on the adjacent national forest lands.

The Bureau of Land Management manages subsurface federal minerals and has the authority to offer public lands for lease to corporations for extraction. The Forest Service can deny the leases due to impacts to the national forest. Community members are urging the National Forest to withdraw their consent to allow these leases to be auctioned.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act, an environmental impact assessment is required before public lands are offered at auction. The BLM's assessment, however, fails to fully disclose fracking effects on the Wayne. The assessment did not address increased surface disturbance, habitat fragmentation and water pollution impacts of opening up these privately owned areas.