

# Marc McCord on How Dallas Was Saved From Frac'ing

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On December 11, the Dallas City Council passed America's most restrictive hydraulic fracturing ordinance. In nearby cities, including Fort Worth, Arlington and Denton, drilling less than 300 feet from residences is not unknown; in Dallas, the new restrictions - including outlawing drilling closer than 1,500 feet from residences and other sensitive areas - essentially prevent drilling from taking place at all, according to oil and gas industry representatives.

FracDallas, a community activist group dedicated to keeping hydraulic fracturing out of Dallas, waged a campaign for more than four years to keep it out of the city. The organization was founded and directed by Marc McCord, an avid outdoorsman who has been involved in environmental protection efforts for more than 20 years. He holds degrees in electrical engineering and aviation electrical engineering, as well as certificates in IBM Systems 3x technology, microcomputer systems technology and video production/broadcast engineering and started educating himself about hydraulic fracturing in 2009. Once he realized the hazards that would follow in its wake, he and FracDallas worked relentlessly to keep it out of Dallas. Their victory is seen as a major blow against industry and sets a precedent that cannot be ignored.

I interviewed McCord about his anti-frac'ing activism recently. (Note: McCord refers to hydraulic fracturing as *frac'ing*, not *fracking*. He says, "*Fracturing* does not include the letter K. Some journalist spelled it that way a few years ago, and it stuck. But it is inappropriate. As an engineer, I am a stickler for adhering to industry nomenclature.")

**Julie Dermansky for Truthout: Tell me about the genesis of your concern about frac'ing and the founding of FracDallas.**

Marc McCord: I became aware of hydraulic fracturing in 2009 when I observed a drilling rig being set up while canoeing on the West Fork of the Trinity River just west of downtown Fort Worth, but I knew nothing about it. Then I started hearing occasional references to it from friends who live in and around Fort Worth. In 2010, I watched *Gasland* on HBO and became very disturbed by the wide-scale invasion and encroachment of frac'ing on residential communities. It was at that time that I first formed FracDallas for the purpose of educating and motivating my Dallas neighbors, friends and family members to oppose such efforts, especially within our city limits. FracDallas really took off in late 2010, when zoning change applications for drilling sites first came before the Dallas City Plan Commission (DCPC or CPC.) Numerous local activists started conferring with me, and together we forged what FracDallas has become today - a significant factor in the fight to keep hydraulic fracturing for natural gas out of Dallas city limits.

**Dallas just passed the strictest ordinances in the region that restrict drilling to no closer than 1,500 feet from homes, schools, day care centers, hospitals, nursing homes, hotels, motels, parks, playgrounds, places of employment and other sensitive areas. Do you think that those restrictions are enough to keep frac'ing out of Dallas, or is this a case of a small victory for environmentalists that eventually will be overturned?**

The Dallas ordinance is THE strongest in the nation! Not only does it mandate a setback of at least 1,500 feet, but it also measures that setback from the nearest edge of the padsite to the nearest edge of the protected use property line. (Most ordinances measure setback from the center of the first well bore to the physical structure on the protected use property.) It also prohibits injection (wastewater disposal) wells within city limits, restricts compressor stations to Industrial Manufacturing (IM) districts only, mandates 100 percent chemical disclosure with no exception for

trade secrets, requires use of discrete tagging agents in frac fluid to track fluid migration in soil and groundwater, has increased insurance requirements (at a time when insurance companies are starting to pull back from covering gas well operations due to inherent risks), and includes other restrictions that are going to be very hard for industry to overcome.

According to the gas drilling industry representatives that have spoken publicly, the new ordinance amounts to a "de facto moratorium against drilling in Dallas," though in reality it is no such thing. It merely sets the standards under which drilling could and would happen if a company chose to drill here. We believe this is a strong ordinance that protects public health and safety, property values, quality of life and our environment. We have no concerns about the new ordinance being overturned because Dallas is a Home Rule Authority city with the right to determine appropriate land use issues to protect the nature and character of our city. Unlike Houston, which developed without zoning ordinances and where heavy industry, residential neighborhoods, retail and commercial interests all share common space, Dallas has used zoning ordinances for over 60 years to segregate citizens from harmful, dangerous industrial activities that hurt people and destroy property values. The new ordinance is hardly limited in effect to just Dallas and local environmentalists. Within minutes of passage, our new ordinance was the talk of the world, and already I have received inquiries about it from Mexico, Australia, Russia and other places far away from Dallas.

**What kind of work did FracDallas do that went on behind the scenes to assure the victory last week?**

FracDallas did most of its work in public by having its members speak at CPC and City Council hearings, but our behind-the-scenes work was mainly strategic planning and preparation for what we were going to say in public. Going back over three years, FracDallas has held many public education forums to inform and engage citizens to become active in protesting drilling inside our city limits, where about 1.241 million people live in about 340 square miles (the entire DFW metro area is home to over

6.5 million people.) We have been working toward this victory since 2010, about four years.

**Why do you think the ordinances are so weak in Arlington and Fort Worth?**

Arlington and Fort Worth, along with Mansfield, Grand Prairie and numerous other Barnett Shale cities, have weak ordinances because they got into gas drilling long before the dangers and hazards were well-known like they are today. In fact, by 2010, a picture of dangers was emerging that was terrifying and disconcerting, but by that time gas drilling in those other cities was already heavily developed. Some of them have since tightened their ordinances, but only Southlake and Flower Mound did anything that even approaches what Dallas did. It is possible that some of those cities will now revisit their drilling ordinances and tighten them even further, as we expect to see happen in Denton.

**People fighting back against industry are labeled activists or ecoterrorists. How do you feel about this? And do you think those labels help squash opposition to industry?**

If it is "activist" or "ecoterrorist" to protect public health and safety, property values, quality of life and our environment, then we are guilty as charged. We never protested drilling when it was done in remote areas of sparse or no population, but then they encroached upon where we live, work, go to school and play. We did not invade their backyard. They invaded ours, and we stood up against them to protect what we have worked hard to have and enjoy, which did not include explosions and fires, fugitive emissions of deadly vapors and liquids, earthquakes that crack our foundations and walls, heavy truck traffic that reduces productivity and causes accidents resulting in deaths and injuries or the other problems that are brought about by urban drilling. Earlier this year, a young preteen boy was run over and killed by a frac truck that did not even stop. After being tracked down and identified, the truck driver claims he never even knew he

hit the boy, and I do not believe any charges were ever brought, even after a hit-and-run fatality.

Personally, I cannot see how name calling by the oil and gas industry has stymied opposition. To the contrary, our numbers are growing daily, and more citizens are standing up to say "NO!" to urban drilling, not only in Dallas, but around the world. If name calling is all the industry has left, then it is truly an industry in decline. Apparently, the name calling strategy did not work with the CPC or City Council, both of which voted with us on 100 percent of every issue that came before them starting back in 2010.

**The FracDallas web site says FracDallas does not oppose safe drilling for gas. It says, "FracDallas opposes unsafe, untested and unproven gas well drilling in densely populated urban areas, semi-rural areas and around sensitive watershed areas where water, air and soil contamination can have disastrous consequences." What would safe drilling look like?**

Safe drilling starts with reputable companies and people acting in responsible ways. Harming people, settling out of court and making them sign nondisclosure agreements then claiming there is no proof that anybody has been harmed is not what I call acting responsibly. It is dishonest and unacceptable behavior by an industry so enamored with itself that it believes it is always right and anybody who opposes it is wrong. Claiming that injection wells are not responsible for earthquakes that just happen to occur in the very areas where injection wells operations are occurring, even though no earthquakes had EVER been recorded there before, is not what I call acting responsibly. Claiming that no groundwater contamination has ever been caused by frac'ing when we and they know that is a lie is not what I call acting responsibly. Refusing to acknowledge that casing pipes and cement failures can and do lead to surface and subsurface water and soil contamination is not what I call acting responsibly. Claiming that they have been "frac'ing wells for over 60 years" when they know that high volume slickwater horizontal hydraulic fracturing only started a little over a decade ago (right here in the Barnett

Shale) is not what I call acting responsibly. Lying in public to elected officials and citizens in order to get permits is not what I call acting responsibly. Failing to remediate any and all damages caused by their operations is not what I call acting responsibly. Being exempted from federal environmental protections laws like the Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Clean Air Act, CERCLA and other laws meant to protect citizens while simultaneously claiming that what they do is safe and harmless is not what I call acting responsibly.

**What impact does the fracking outside the city limits have on Dallas? Is Dallas at risk of earthquakes now from the injection wells? Does the drilling activity outside of the city limits jeopardize your water supply?**

There can be no doubt that frac'ing outside of Dallas is adversely impacting the city of Dallas. According to a study by the Southern Methodist University Environmental Sciences Department, releases of VOCs and NOx from Barnett Shale gas production account for 55 percent of all harmful air emissions in the DFW metro area. Earthquakes are being felt in Dallas, and though they are minor, that does not mean a future quake of significant magnitude will never be felt. DFW International Airport closed two injection wells on airport property because they were causing earthquakes under the runways of the fifth-largest airport in the world, and the airport board feared a runway failure leading to possible deaths and injuries, as well as major economic disruption for the DFW area, the state of Texas, the United States and the entire world.

None of Dallas' drinking water reservoirs is actually within city limits, and some are in areas where frac'ing and injection well operations are being done. Dallas has contracts with 19 smaller cities and towns to supply them with drinking water as well. Many wells have been drilled under lakes and reservoirs including at Grapevine Lake, Joe Pool Reservoir, Lake Dallas, Eagle Mountain Lake, Lake Bridgeport, Lake Benbrook and other major lakes in our area, most of which have earthen dams. Chesapeake Energy drilled a well in Grand Prairie just 850 feet from the spillway at Joe Pool

Reservoir in clear violation of BLM's Texas Resource Management Plan, which stipulates a 3,000-foot exclusion zone around any US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) flood control device (dam, spillway, levee, etc.), and if frac'ing or injection well operations cause sinkholes or earthquakes that break the dam footing, then we could have 10,000 or more people living immediately below and in the path of the outflow of the dam or spillway killed in the resulting flood that would put about 3 feet of water into downtown Dallas (according to statements made by the USACE.) Joe Pool is a drinking water reservoir for Dallas and numerous other small towns in Dallas, Ellis, Johnson and Tarrant Counties.

**Although natural gas burns cleaner than other fossil fuels, the process to obtain the natural gas also pollutes the environment. Politicians that push for its use by selling it as "the clean gas" are not credible. What must be done to educate people? And what is the way forward toward clean energy?**

Politicians go where the money can be found. They are not worried or concerned about credibility if it interferes with getting money for the next election. Education of the public and public officials is the single biggest objective we have to accomplish. It will require getting honest, investigative media coverage, which is almost nonexistent right now. It will also require overcoming the public-relations smoke screen of the oil and gas industry that uses propaganda, military psychological warfare tactics, outright lies and paid media exposure to get the general population up to speed on the truth about this fossil fuel industry and its self-serving motives. In time, the oil and gas companies will be the leaders in alternative energy development and production, but right now, they are milking their fossil fuel cow for the very last drop of its milk (oil and gas.) Until the public demands a change, no large-scale change will occur.

**What do you want others to know about what it took to bring about the restrictions approved in Dallas last week? And what, if anything, can the public do to effect change not only in their own backyard but around the planet?**

In Dallas, it took years of self-education, holding public education forums, motivating citizens to be concerned and addressing public officials at EVERY SINGLE PUBLIC HEARING on gas drilling to finally win the ordinance that we got (December 11, 2013). I have personally been learning everything I can about this issue for nearly five years, and there is still much more to learn. The public can hold public officials accountable for their actions and votes, and that is required if we want to effect change and protect our environment. The first step is caring enough to educate yourself and then be willing to take the time, effort and expense to help educate family, friends and neighbors. Democracy is messy, and it never works when people allow somebody else to carry their water for them. People must get involved on a personal level because this issue is too critically important to leave to chance - or to the fossil fuel industry. If you cannot do things yourself, then provide some financial support to those who are trying to make a difference, and help spread their message. Doing nothing is not an option.

It is important to remember that mankind lived without the commercial production of oil and gas for about 200,000-400,000 years until around 1859, but no living thing on this planet can survive without an abundance of clean water and clean air. There are no substitutes.