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The Forest, the Trees And the Gas Below; Finger Lakes Residents Debate Plan For Drilling on National Woodlands

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A quilt of forgotten apple orchards and tangled pastures, the Finger Lakes National Forest, the only national forest in New York, is an anonymous 25 square miles in the lush woodlands upstate, and a speck compared with the vast acres of wilderness in the West.

Yet over the last year, the national forest and villages around it, like Hector, have been engulfed by the same disputes about opening federal lands to oil and natural gas drilling that have swirled around places like Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Several companies seek to tap the estimated 16 billion cubic feet of gas below the Finger Lakes forest -- a small reservoir that could, according to the United States Forest Service, provide energy for 20 years to the 33,000 residents of Seneca County, where part of the forest lies.

Congress recently approved a one-year moratorium on drilling here, but the Forest Service, which favors limited drilling, is proceeding with an environmental study and expects to decide within the next two weeks whether the forest should eventually be opened to gas production.

Opponents of gas drilling here worry the reprieve will be fleeting. Rising tension in the Middle East has stirred enthusiasm about developing domestic energy reserves.

"They've taken advantage of the fervor of patriotism and giving the president the chance to do what he wants," said Irene Brown, a former Hector Town Board member and an opponent of drilling. "I don't like the decision personally," she said of the temporary moratorium, "but we have to face reality." She said she would have preferred an outright ban.

The debate over economic gain versus environmental good has sheared through Seneca and Schuyler Counties, among the poorest in New York and home to the national forest. Many New York officials have protested, including Gov. E. George Pataki, a Republican; Senators Charles E. Schumer and Hillary Rodham Clinton, both Democrats; several members of Congress and hundreds of local residents. But other townspeople quietly say that many would welcome gas development as a potential source of jobs and taxes.

Opponents of drilling fear that limited drilling could expand to swallow much of the national forest. "Once the rights are handed over to private companies, once their foot is in the door, it's a pretty big foot," said John Compton, 29, a cabinetmaker here who is opposed to drilling.

Gas companies already produce natural gas in southwestern New York. But they are moving farther east, signing leases with landowners in Finger Lakes counties.

The Finger Lakes forest, which lies between Seneca and Cayuga Lakes, was patched together from farms the federal government bought in the 1930's. It was declared a national forest in 1986 at the urging of local residents, who fought a federal initiative to sell the land.

Yet as the dairy farms that supported Schuyler County for years now wither, many people are seeking new sources of income. "If you haven't noticed in your driving around here," said Louis Rosbaugh, a retiree who lives across a road from the forest and favors drilling, "this is Appalachia."

Opponents of drilling say the community, despite its poverty, lopsidedly favors preserving the forest. Most people who responded to the draft environmental impact statement were against drilling, said Chris Zimmer, a Forest Service ranger.

But conversations in offices and on farms, with people removed from the activism, suggest a more varied picture, marked by differences in class and origins. Jane Ike, the Schuyler County clerk, says she thinks many want drilling but are shy about speaking up, convinced that the government will do what it wishes. David Poyer, a Town Board member, says the discussion has been shaped by outsiders, like students and faculty members from nearby Cornell University in Ithaca and recent arrivals who rely on the growing tourism and wine businesses.

Of those opposed to drilling, Mr. Rosbaugh said, "their view is we don't want anything but a playground for the rich."

The difference may lie with the way people thought about the forest before drilling became an issue. For Mr. Rosbaugh, it is an unsightly wall of trees that obscure resources that could provide for his family.

For others, the forest is a dense weave of symbol and memory. One sunny afternoon, Mr. Compton stood at the edge of Teeter Pond and watched a blue heron rise from the water. Mr. Compton grew up by the forest, losing himself in it every day after school. He still explores the land restlessly and readily shares the small truths he gathers: that the lady-slipper, an antidote to itching, grows next to poison ivy and that cherry bark will always catch fire as kindling. And the forest's smallness, he said, makes it utterly fragile.

"The forest is only two miles wide," Mr. Compton said. "You can't come in here and do anything without a serious impact."

Yet drilling opponents have succeeded by arguing economics more than environment. Drilling advocates in the West assert that fossil fuel production on federal land creates revenues. But here, drilling opponents say, income to Schuyler County would be a pittance -- just 2 percent of the royalties -- and taxpayers would have to finance repairs to roads damaged by heavy trucks. Drilling proponents disagree but have apparently won few converts.

Businesses that could revive the local economy rely on the forest. Small vineyards unscroll downhill from the forest toward the edge of Seneca Lake. The spring water Richard Fiegel uses to make his chardonnay and pinot noir at the Silver Thread Winery is fed by the watershed of the national forest, and he is alarmed by the chemicals used in producing natural gas.

"Almost everybody acknowledges that drilling will happen on private land," Mr. Fiegel said, suggesting what many think is the best compromise. "And that way, more money will stay in the community."

The Forest Service and others argue that drilling in the northeastern part of the forest, which is mainly pasture, would be the best solution. But Mr. Zimmer conceded that under the Forest Service plan for limited drilling, the rest of the forest would still remain open to leasing and so, to drilling.

What drilling entails can be seen on Barney and Mary Broz's farm in Chemung County, about 20 miles southeast of the forest. On half an acre, there is a seven-foot-tall steel pipe that marks the gas well. A few yards away, the industrial jungle gym of the production unit, all tanks and pipes, heats the gas and separates it from fluid.

That fluid is siphoned away to a tank next to pits, lined with plastic and now covered with grass, holding the chemicals and shavings from drilling. From the production unit, the gas flows into a pipeline that vanishes downhill under a broad lawn between two copses. The trees scraped away to install the pipeline lie in a heap to the side.

Mr. Broz is pleased that long-fallow land might now bring income. But as he drives from his well to a neighbor's, looks at the crushed rocks on the ground and listens to the pipes clanging like an outsize radiator, he ponders what such changes would mean for the national forest.

"I don't know if the drilling would hurt the forest so much, but having swaths cut out of it would certainly mean it would be less beautiful," Mr. Broz said. "As we deplete the energy resources in the world, the question is, at what cost?"