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Oil boom fears flow in pristine Irish Hills

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John Bancroft says he fears oil will leak into a creek in his yard. / March 5 photos by MANDI WRIGHT/Detroit Free Press

By Tina Lam

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BROOKLYN, Mich. -- Bringing with it concerns about potential earthquakes, contaminated drinking water and dangerous spills, an oil boom has hit the popular, pristine vacation destination of the Irish Hills in Jackson and Lenawee counties.

Tall rigs punch holes among lakes and wetlands, and gas flares light up the night sky.

In Adrian, rows of pink flags mark the spots where oil companies are doing seismic testing to determine whether there's oil below

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homes. Schools and colleges have leased out lands for oil drilling. Horses gaze across fields to pumping oil derricks.

The boom that began with discoveries of oil near tiny Napoleon three years ago has made Jackson County the state's top oil producer. It produces about 2% of the oil customers consume statewide, a company executive said. Manistee County in northern

Michigan is the second-highest producer, and Lenawee County is third.

But some say the growing string of more than 60 oil wells in a diagonal line across Jackson and Lenawee counties -- in the midst of summer cottages and lakeside pubs -- shouldn't be happening. Along with promises of fattened bank accounts and higher tax revenues, there is alarm about deep-injection wells planned for drilling waste, which have been tied to earthquakes elsewhere, and about oil spills in this watery paradise, where everyone gets their water from wells.

"Even the guys collecting oil checks have got to feel some regret," said John Bancroft, a former Troy teacher who retired and built his dream home in the Irish Hills. "What they did changed everybody's life."

Now, state tourist area is also home to oil drilling rigs

BROOKLYN, Mich. -- Adam Ulbin's voice shook a little. The supervisor of Norvell Township was complaining to an oil company about its heavy trucks hauling oil and drilling fluids from wells in the area.

"Your trucks on our roads are tearing them up," he said. "You violate every part of our truck ordinance, 24 hours a day. The amount of money we're getting from you won't pay

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A horse shares space with an oil well in Adrian in Lenawee County. Lenawee and Jackson counties have experienced an oil boom in the past three years. Some residents are happy to see the drilling rigs and the money that follows, but others are wary of the environmental impact. / March 5 photos by MANDI WRIGHT/Detroit Free Press



Irish Hills community activists John Bancroft and Pam Bacon stand near one of the oil wells. They are concerned about possible water contamination. "A hundred years from now, who knows what kind of environmental damage we'll have clobbered people with," Bancroft said.

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DRILLING FOR OIL IN THE IRISH HILLS

In the last three years, a mini-boom of oil drilling has turned Jackson into the state's No. 1 oil-producing county, with Lenawee third.



for the white stripes on the roads."

An oil boom has hit in Jackson and Lenawee counties, with two companies drilling more than 60 wells since 2009, nearly half of them in Norvell Township in the heart of the Irish Hills. With oil prices high and natural gas prices low, companies have shifted from drilling for gas to oil, and the area has become the state's top oil producer, said Scott Bellinger, editor of Michigan Oil and Gas News. It's a brand-new oil field, never before drilled, he said.

It's a tourist area, packed in the summer with boaters and cottage residents, many from Detroit suburbs. Pumping derricks and giant drilling rigs are now scattered among farms, marshes, lakes and roads; some homes look

across fields to derricks. In some spots, where gas flames are flaring, the odor of petroleum is potent.

Oil companies are seeking more mineral leases and more spots to drill, and now, permits for deep-injection wells to inject their waste fluids underground.

Although some residents are happy to see the drilling rigs, which mean more money in their pockets, more taxes for the state and a few new jobs, others are concerned.

Ulbin, a baker and owner of Stone Hearth Breads, has been in township government since the early 1970s. Besides the wear and tear on the roads, he is concerned about leaks and spills, a drop in property values and harm to wetlands and rivers.

The township has worked hard to protect nearby waters, putting in new sewers, cutting back on the use of algae-creating phosphates, stopping a road through a wetland and forcing cleanup of historic oil contamination from a gasoline station. "Now comes all this," he said. "It just doesn't seem right."

Resident John Bancroft, who lives a little more than a mile from an oil well, fears it could leak into a creek in his backyard. "A hundred years from now, who knows what kind of environmental damage we'll have clobbered people with," he said.

Sandiland Langschied and her husband have leased out land they own near Brooklyn for drilling. They're happy to have extra money - she won't say how much. "I see two sides to it, but I have reservations about the long-term effects," she said.

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State cites safeguards

Residents are worried not only about the oil drilling, but the injection wells, the flaring gases, potential water contamination and what the future holds. Oil and gas drilling is new to the Irish Hills, an area much more heavily populated than northern counties in Michigan with oil, such as Manistee.

The state says it has plenty of regulations to prevent problems.

"Oil and gas is where nature put it," said Hal Fitch, who oversees oil and gas drilling for the Department of Environmental Quality. "You don't have a choice."

Drilling deep-injection wells for waste near the oil wells cuts down on truck traffic, since the waste no longer has to be hauled away, he said.

Pat Gibson, a vice president of West Bay Exploration, one of the oil companies, said his firm is from Traverse City and has drilled Up North in the past without problems. "It's in a similar area to this, with lakes, and we live there," he said. "We try to lessen the impact we have."

Rather than drilling straight into the bottom of a lake or marsh, the company will drill horizontally beneath it from a distance, for example, he said. "We try to pick the best place to put wells."

Fracking fears

Fears that the oil companies might be using hydraulic fracturing, or fracking -- a process in which millions of gallons of water and chemicals are shot at high pressure down a well to break up oil- or gas-bearing rock -- drew about 400 people to a town hall earlier this month.

At the packed meeting, executives of West Bay, which has drilled most of the wells in the region, said they are not fracking. They don't need to because the rock beneath the area already is porous and gives up the oil readily, Gibson said.

"Even if they are not doing it now, they may in the future," said Pam Bacon, who lives on Timber Lake in the Irish Hills and has researched oil and gas drilling for the past two years, since West Bay tried to lease her land. She is deeply concerned about deep-injection wells and the possibility of fracking in the area, where all residents get their water from wells.

Fracking has gotten a bad reputation because of an award-winning 2010 documentary, "Gasland," which highlights contaminated drinking wells in states such as Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York and Colorado. Since its debut, the film, which shows people lighting

their tap water on fire, has fueled an angry debate over deep drilling.

The Environmental Protection Agency did a preliminary study in December showing that groundwater in a town in Wyoming was contaminated by fracking, and in Ohio, the state closed some deep-injection wells after they were tied to small earthquakes earlier this year.

Problems shown in "Gasland" are not happening in Michigan, the state insists. "Hydraulic fracturing has been done in more than 10,000 wells over the past 40 years in northern Michigan's Antrim shale, without incident," Fitch said. Until the movie, nobody even asked many questions about the drilling, he said.

Michigan environmental groups are split on fracking. Some want to halt it, while others say that's impossible and want tougher regulations.

"What happened in 'Gasland' is what happens when you don't regulate," said Grenetta Thomassey, program director of Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, a nonprofit group that defends northern Michigan's waters. "Michigan has a very decent set of oil and gas regulations, but it needs to be updated to reflect new technologies."

After working with Thomassey's group, Fitch did issue new regulations last year in response to concerns, requiring companies using new deep fracking methods to disclose the chemicals they use on the agency's website and to assess whether their water use would hurt nearby streams.

Luanne Kozma is co-founder of Ban Michigan Fracking. She said the state can't afford to experiment with deep fracking, and she doesn't trust assurances about a lack of contamination in the past. She said that however it's being done, she finds drilling in the Irish Hills among so much water to be alarming.

"The consequences, whether the industry is calling it fracking or not, could be enormous," she said.

Chris Grobbel, a Traverse City scientist and expert witness in environmental law cases who once worked for the DEQ, disputes the idea there has been no contamination from oil and gas drilling in Michigan, in fracked or conventional wells. The state once kept a database with more than 300 incidents of spills, he said.

"I've worked on cases for landowners who have had spills on their properties," including that of a farmer who lost his dairy certification after a spill and had to fight for a cleanup of crude oil and brine fluid from the spill.

Fitch said there has not been a case in which a well has contaminated an underground aquifer, which has happened in other states. He acknowledged that there have been spills and other types of accidents from wells and the trucks and pipelines that serve them. "Accidents do happen," he said.

James Clift, policy director for the Michigan Environmental Council, agreed. That's why the bond companies post is important, to guarantee a cleanup even if the company is out of funds, he said. In Jackson and Lenawee counties, the oil firms are paying a bond of \$250,000 each to cover all the wells.

"That's hopelessly inadequate," Clift said. "We need to change that."

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