

“Denton Air Pollution Led to Short-Lived Fracking Ban”

By Sara McNiel

Denton County, located in North Texas, consistently ranks as one of the worst areas in Texas for air pollution. A hydraulic fracking ban was issued in 2015 in hopes to reduce this environmental damage, making Denton the first Texas town to ban fracking and gas drilling. Though this ban was short-lived, their efforts made an impact by creating hope for the town in progress towards a healthier environment.

According to the [NT Daily](#), Denton County earned an “F” ranking regarding their ozone from the American Lung Association. One major contributing factor comes from the approximately 250 gas wells in the area, according to [A Field Philosopher’s Guide to Fracking](#), by Adam Briggie, an [Associate Professor](#) at the University of North Texas. Residents living near these fracking sites are exposed to toxicity from the air that is released during fracking. These toxins include [high levels of](#) benzene, hydrogen sulfide, and formaldehyde. The effects of being overly exposed to these harmful chemicals can increase the [risks of](#) cancer, birth defects, and respiratory problems.

Briggie earned his Ph.D. in Environmental Studies and researches the ethics of science and technology policies. Briggie spent three years at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, working on the philosophy of technology as a postdoctoral fellow. His book, [‘A Field Philosopher’s Guide to Fracking’](#) discusses the effects of fracking, and how to critically think about the debate, ethics, and solutions regarding fracking. Briggie’s lifelong passion for environmentalism led him to try and save his hometown, Denton, from fracking’s damaging effects, and hasn’t let anything stand in his way. In an attempt to stop Denton's fracking, he protested in 2015 by sitting and blocking the entrance to a fracking site. His refusal to move led to the Denton Police Department arresting him.

“I’ve always been passionate about environmental issues but did not learn about fracking until about ten years ago,” Briggie said. “I mainly wanted to do something to help make my new hometown of Denton a safer and healthier place for my children and all residents.”

Briggle founded a local grassroots organization, [Denton Drilling Awareness Group](#), which is dedicated to educating the public about environmental issues. Their petition “Frack Free Denton” received enough signatures to bring it to the Denton City Council, where they then voted in favor of banning all fracking in the area in 2015. Denton then became the first city in Texas to ban fracking and gas drilling.

Their success was short-lived. Within just six months, Texas Governor Greg Abbott passed the HB-40 bill which prohibits all bans on fracking. Abbott passed this bill to protect the oil and gas industry, which according to Todd Staples, [President of the Texas Oil & Gas Association](#), makes up [two million jobs, and 40 percent](#) of the Texas economy. The bill is also meant to protect private property rights by restricting the government’s ability to access and control oil and gas companies’ properties.

Poor air quality due to fracking affects millions of other Americans. In 2018, the Environment Research and Policy Center released a [report](#) of 108 million Americans living in dangerously low air quality for over 100 days. According to [Fracktracker Alliance](#), 1.7 million fracking wells were in the U.S. as of 2015. This number increases every year by about 13,000 new wells.

Not only are residents affected by fracking, but so is the natural environment. Every time a well is fractured, about [2 to 10 million](#) gallons of water are needed. Fracking companies often use local water sources which led to more droughts, negatively impacting the natural environment and wildlife. Oil spills [pollute](#) nearby water, harming both underwater wildlife as well as nearby communities that use the water as their drinking source. Though some of these oil spills are accidental, workers will still purposely dump excess slickwater (chemicals used to make fluid pumped faster) into nearby water. The burning of fossil fuels also continues to add to the climate change crisis by releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, raising global temperatures. When it comes to trying to make a positive change for the environment, Briggle stresses the importance

of starting locally and understanding how it will end up helping on a larger scale, like climate change.

“Globally, the biggest issue is climate change. I hope that people take the time to connect the dots to see how their actions contribute to these problems and then find ways large and small to try to do better.” Briggle said.

Many environmentalists are in support of the [Green New Deal](#), a proposal for the federal government to cut back on allowing the burning of fossil fuels, as well as offer more high-paying jobs in clean energy industries. This deal would also include calling an end to fracking.

Though Denton’s fracking ban was short-lived, it raised hope that progress towards a healthier environment is possible through citizen involvement and education. Now, nearly six years later, no fracking has taken place in the area since the temporary ban.

“I think it had the positive impact of motivating lots of people to become more informed and politically active. Several city council members serving now began their political careers in the Frack Free Denton campaign.” Briggle said.