

Dec 3, 2012. Editor's Headline: "The landowners aren't all right"

A handyman rang the doorbell, wanting to rake the leaves from my front yard for a couple of bucks. He was in his mid-fifties and looked hungry. I hated to send him away. When I said, "How about a bowl of soup?" he answered, "Oh, no. I'm alright."

None of us is alright but few would admit to it.

Wyomingites tend to think of the land as rugged, wild, and blessed with resources there for the taking. In fact the land, owing to its aridity, is fragile. Once damaged, it cannot recover or repair itself. Reckless resource extraction only accelerates the collapse waiting to happen.

Pioneers in the 1800s left permanent scars from their wooden wagon wheels. Ruts gauged deeply into the soil are visible to this day—near Guernsey, for example, where the wounds are reminders that the land is easily ruined.

Fragility of land hits home on a personal level. On retiring a few years ago, I invested my life savings in a wheat field near the town whose name attests to the valley's culture. The field, together with acreage leased from BLM, annually amounts to roughly 480 acres of "hard red winter wheat" that's raised in a non-irrigated process called dry-land farming. The producer who farms my acreage, call him Mr. B, also raises wheat on family-owned land. The seed is planted in August, sprouts in September, falls dormant through the winter, and returns to life in the spring. Plants mature in the summer, whereupon the cereal is harvested.

Was, I should say. Was harvested. My investment is on the way to joining the vanished pension plans of former employees of Enron and other bankrupted corporations (there are more than you'd think) and the collapsed portfolios of folks who entrusted their investments to Bernie Madoff and other manipulators of his ilk. This year's wheat plantlets—if they sprouted at all—are stunted shadows of their former selves. Ditto the blades of grass on Wyoming range lands. Harsh winds erode bone-dry topsoil.

Corporate sharks, banking predators, and investment racketeers triggered a market collapse and recession we've yet to put behind us. Similar profiteering has triggered the dying of rural Wyoming.

My handful of acres is microcosmic of the farms and cattle ranches in greater Wheatland and beyond. All are one remove from the corporate and Wall Street forces that hasten their demise, aided and abetted by local politicians who have become the flacks of industry, decrying as "interference" any and all federal regulations meant to limit the over-reaching.

The Wheatland die-off's probable cause is global warming, which is the result of countless tons of carbon dioxide dumped into the atmosphere, no thanks to full-tilt

fossil-fuel exploitation and wasteful abuses of these resources. Even as Montana's glaciers shrink at alarming rates, global warming hereabouts is yet euphemized as extreme drought that's bound to end. Snow still falls in Montana, right?

In a couple of decades Glacier National Park will be history, scientists tell us. Still, observations as these are dismissed as "apocalyptic hogwash" by some. From the insulation of his Kansas editorial office, E. Thomas McClanahan is betting on good time ahead with hydraulic fracturing.

Dream on, Thomas. When you're on the receiving end, you know from experience what scientists have learned from computer models: fracking is disastrous to our environment and the people trying to survive in it.

It doesn't have to be this way. Germany, a country less than twice the size of Wyoming with a population of 82 million, is phasing out coalmines and nuclear plants alike. Its government, determined to exist on renewables like thermal and solar energy, sends packing the multinationals that come running with offers to extract its shale deposits. Germany's forests are carefully managed; its scant logging is government controlled. Residents, rich or not, pay for government services with hefty taxes. Any politician who professed doubt in human-caused climate change would be laughed out of office.

Two doors down, sorely-beset Greece teeters on the brink of disaster. A "free" market and "trickle-down" economics does nothing to benefit average denizens; instead, it maintains a caste of super-wealthy individuals who pay no taxes and plunder the land with impunity. Global warming arrived years early, via mega-wildfires that devoured orchards and olive groves. Ever more stringent austerity measures are imposed on working stiffes who take to the streets in vain, protesting government policies that rob them of livelihood.

I'm new to a life beset by a combination of fossil-fuel extraction run amok and state government turning a blind eye. But already ten years ago, Powder River Basin ranchers began suing industry heavies for pollution from coalbed-methane (CBM) "processed" water that swamped rangeland. The soil lost its grasses and sprouted salt-tolerant vegetation cattle won't eat. The poison water killed the cottonwood trees on surrounding ranches. Wildcat Creek was but one CBM victim "shit outa luck" as the writers of "Bushwacked" put it. The authors devoted an entire chapter to the Powder River debacle—which continues today. After taking office, Governor Mead toured some of the ranches inundated with the poison water, offering sympathy but no action. Wildcat Creek is still a mess, Powder River residents tell me.

With the advent of hydraulic fracturing, the Wyoming conundrum has targeted more sufferers, Sublette County to Pavillion. Ozone spikes in the winter, fracking chemicals migrating into groundwater: these facts are physically observable. So is the global warming engulfing Wyoming and beyond, revved up in but a few short

years through fossil-fuel practices bent on profit at all cost. Observable evidence drowns in the shouts of deniers.

What's to be done? Residents ingesting ozone or drawing water from contaminated wells; cattle ranchers and family farmers like Mr. B, stunned into helplessness as the land withers; newbe small landholders like yours truly, sucked into a downturn spiral: we're "shit outa luck."

"Alright"? Not on your life.