

Heaven Sensky, Center for Coalfield Justice

Good afternoon. My name is Heaven Sensky, and I am a community organizer with the Center for Coalfield Justice serving Washington and Greene Counties in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The Center for Coalfield Justice is a grassroots environmental justice non profit that serves to educate our communities on fossil fuel operations and advocate for healthier, safer communities. My primary role is to serve as a community liaison around all issues related to fossil fuel extraction in our communities, particularly the impacts of oil and gas development. It is a privilege to present to you today on the substantial impacts of the state budget on the health and safety of our communities.

This past year, I have been the lead organizer on a frightening reality for the people of Southwestern Pennsylvania. We have seen disproportionate high rates of *rare* childhood cancers across our rural communities, increasing from 2008, that make up more than 30 cases of only 250 recorded nationwide. We have seen a 150% increase in the prevalence of bone cancers, sarcoma cancers, in our communities since 2008. We have seen lower birth weights, higher rates of thyroid conditions, and more children with debilitating asthma. I reference this because it notably coincides with the fracking boom that has taken over our backyards, and people are frightened.

People feel unsafe in our communities. There is widespread distrust in the government's ability to keep their children safe. Despite the alarming reality of what is statistically distinguishable, there has been little to no public health intervention. What there has been is continued permitting and build out of potentially dangerous fossil fuel infrastructure next to school yards and playgrounds and all around our homes.

In the midst of all of this, the agencies that are supposed to protect us are once again getting their resources cut. The Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Health are the only authorities that stand between us, and the industrial buildout of harmful fossil fuel infrastructure in our communities. Cutting the resources of the authorities that are the last stand to protect us is not going to help them to do their job and will not minimize distrust among communities with their government.

Through the impacts of covid, we have seen the worst of what a lack of in-person inspections has led to. The oil and gas industry has operated unregulated, and residents have gone without support for potentially life threatening complaints. All of this in the wake of the Attorney General's investigation proving that Range Resources poisoned the waters of our communities. All the while industry continued to receive permits to build out new infrastructure. Now we face budget cuts, to the already struggling regulatory agencies that are supposed to be protecting us.

When operations go unregulated and unenforced because of under funding, the health and safety of our communities is threatened. We know that in 2019, the industry received 3.1 billion dollars

in tax subsidies. This is the same size as the GDP of some countries. Why are we allowing the industry to skate by on tax cuts, while our communities are suffering and our regulatory agencies are not resourced adequately to do their jobs? How is it even a question that we cannot minimize oversight of the operations of an industry that is *dangerous* to the extent of which is so immeasurable that we do not even know the existential impact of their operations?

If agencies were funded well enough, the unknown of industry operations would not go unregulated, uninspected, or unchecked. Residents could call the DEP with concerns of operations on their property, and expect an in-person inspection within 24 hours. Complaints and violations would be followed through, and companies would be held accountable to the mistakes that they make on their life-threatening sites. There is also something to be said about the ways in which the legislature could push to ensure that agencies are enforcing and providing oversight despite who holds the positions of authority in said agencies, despite the culture of oil and gas in our state, and despite the money that crosses hands in our political system.

It is absolutely imperative that these agencies hold companies accountable who continue to grow and establish larger operations in our backyards. Our lives depend on it.