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## **DRILLING FOR OIL AND GAS NEAR THE GREAT LAKES**

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A popular trout stream is the focus of a new battle over oil and gas development in the Great Lakes region. An energy company wants to drill for oil and gas under a publicly-owned natural area. The ensuing controversy is a complex round in an old debate over protection of wildlife habitat versus development of valuable mineral rights. The Great Lakes Radio Consortium's Sally Eisele reports:

The Mason Tract is one of the last semi-wilderness areas in Michigan's lower peninsula. The hilly, forested acres by the south branch of the Au Sable River are the historical playground of Henry Ford, George Mason, and other early auto executives, who made the difficult journey North to fish for the stream's elusive trout. The land belonged to Mason and he bequeathed it to the state when he died in 1955 with the condition that it remain undeveloped.

(sound of stream)

On this rainy autumn day, the land looks much as it did then. The river winds its way through 14 miles of red pine, aspen and birch. And the brown trout that lurk in the shadows of the stream are still legendary.

"People come from all over the world to fish and recreate along this river system."

Rusty Gates owns a small fishing lodge nearby and is founder and president of a group called Anglers of the Au Sable. He has lived by the river most of his life.

"The Mason tract. You go over to the trails and they are the way they've been for the last 50 years. You're just as likely to see deer, turkey bear. This is just one of the best special spots left in northern lower Michigan and it's worth preserving."

Gates leads the way up a well-worn trail from the river here to a small open air chapel—a slate-roofed sanctuary, basically—built in memory of George Mason. But just over the rise, the land is part of the Huron National forest. It's on that federal land that the Savoy Energy Company of Traverse City wants to drill a two-mile deep slant well to access the mineral deposits it has leased under the state-owned Mason Tract. Rusty Gates learned about the plan on June 10th.

"On the 15th, I sent out an email letting people see this notice. And within 20 minutes I had a response back from Seattle, San Francisco, Atlanta and Vermont. People offering to help."

The drilling proposal has drawn heavy opposition from environmentalists, sports enthusiasts and some lawmakers who raise a host of concerns. If the well is drilled, a road will be built, trees will be cut down and, at least initially, a well will be pumping oil or natural gas not far from the chapel 24 hours a day. Opponents are worried about noise, possible spills and noxious odors. They complain that the effect of any drilling will be to destroy the character of this unique tract of land. Savoy Energy has refused repeated requests for interviews. The state Department of Environmental Quality has twice rejected Savoy's application for a drilling permit, asking the company to consider other sites for the wellhead itself. But DEQ spokesman Hal Fitch says legally, Savoy is on solid ground.

"The leases give the company the right to go in and explore for and develop and produce oil and natural gas. We need to take into account the citizens concerns there. But we need to do it in a way that honors those concerns as well as the property rights of Savoy Energy."

Property rights are at the heart of this dispute. In a situation that goes back to the early settlement of the country, land and the mineral rights are often owned separately. In Michigan, the mineral rights dominate, and sometimes state, federal and private interests collide. A similar conflict over proposed drilling along the Lake Michigan dunes ten years ago cost the state 90 million dollars to settle. David Dempsey of the Michigan Environmental Council says the Mason Tract fight could also be costly if a compromise isn't reached.

"I think it's part of a much bigger issue that's going to continue until we live up to our responsibilities as a people and as a government. The issue is, are there some areas that are publicly owned either the surface or the subsurface that are so sensitive they should never be developed?"

The Mason Tract issue has renewed calls for laws better protecting sensitive watersheds. But University of Michigan geologist Steven Kesler cautions, there is no way to eliminate risk in oil and gas exploration.

There's no way you could drill a well and assure yourself there would not be an accident. I think it would be fair to say the risks are small, but the risks are there."

Kesler notes that with more than 11-thousand oil and gas wells currently in operation, Michigan's track record is good. And with increased demand for domestic fuel sources, he says conflicts between the stewards of the land and the stewards of the minerals are inevitable.

"When I put on my geologists hat, I see a state with a pretty good distribution of oil and gas resources and I see a country that desperately needs oil and natural gas. Looking at it that way, I find myself thinking we've got to find ways to preserve land and at the same time, use it as responsibly as we can."

At this point, no one is saying Savoy Energy should not be allowed to drill for the oil and gas deposits under the Mason Tract. In fact, with state and federal approval, drilling could begin this winter. But if the wellhead isn't located far enough from the river to address concerns about its impact on George Mason's legacy, the fight could escalate into yet another legal battle over which is more important—protection of wild areas or extraction of the oil and gas far beneath them.

For the Great Lakes Radio Consortium, I'm Sally Eisele.

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