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A new short film is bringing national attention to Grant Township and the rights of nature movement.



A new short film produced by the Wild Lens Collective and Running Wild Media is bringing national attention to a small Pennsylvania town's fight to prevent a fracking company from turning their home into a toxic waste dump. The film, titled Hellbent, premiered in early 2023 and has since screened at film festivals, universities, non-profits, and community-led organizations across the country and has received several awards, including best short film at the New York Wild Film Festival and the audience award at the American Conservation Film Festival.

Film Synopsis (short version):

In a small rural town in Pennsylvania, the refuge of a rare salamander and the only source of clean drinking water for 700 people is threatened by the installation of a fracking waste injection well, prompting community members to band together to fight for the rights of their people and nature.

Why it matters/news peg:

In the wake of the train derailment in Palestine, Ohio, people have begun to realize how little power small towns in the United States have to protect themselves from the fallout of poor fossil fuel industry practices. In many places, oil and gas companies operate with impunity, dumping, spilling, and leaking their waste into the environment without ever facing repercussions. Hellbent tells the story of a mother and daughter in rural Pennsylvania that successfully prevented a fracking company from dumping toxic waste near their local watershed by granting it legal rights.

Legal rights have been granted to nature in the United States before, but in most cases, it was quickly overturned. But Grant township was successful and their victory has set a precedent for small towns across the country. However, their fight isn't over and they need your support.

Where to watch:

Hellbent is available to [watch for free online](#) as part of Jackson Wild's World Wildlife Day Film Showcase.

Promo images: [\[Credit: Justin Grubb\]](#)

Contact:

Producer:

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Characters/Experts:

Stacy Wanchisn - Supervisor Vice-Chair of Grant Township [swl@catsupgraphics.com]

Dr. Ted Auch - Great Lakes Program Coordinator at the FracTracker Alliance
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Film Synopsis (long version):

Hellbent tells the story of one town's epic fight to prevent a fracking waste injection well from being built in their community. In 2013, a mother and daughter living in Grant Township, Pennsylvania, heard that a fracking company wanted to build a wastewater injection well near the Little Mahoning Creek, their town's only source of fresh water and one of the last refuges of the endangered eastern hellbender salamander.

These women, known as Judy and Stacey Wanchisn, rallied their community against the project out of fear of the threats it posed to the Little Mahoning. "I remember some of the statistics and it was scary," recalls Judy. Fracking wastewater injection wells are loaded with harmful chemicals and radioactive substances and are prone to leaks and even explosions. For Judy and Stacey, the risk of wastewater from the injection well getting into their local watershed was too great to ignore. "If our water systems are permanently contaminated or screwed up in any way, then there are going to be 700 people without water," says Stacey.

Through community organizing, Judy and Stacey helped pass an ordinance in their town that prohibits the dumping of fracking waste in June of 2014. Less than two months later, Pennsylvania General Energy, the fracking company seeking to dump their waste in Grant Township, sued Grant Township in federal court, claiming that the town was infringing on the company's constitutional right to build a wastewater injection well within the town. Grant Township sought the help of the EPA but was ignored.

Then in 2015, the people of Grant Township voted to enact a Home Rule Charter that banned the depositing of frack waste and granted legal rights to the Little Mahoning Watershed. After partnering with the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF), the people of Grant Township then intervened in the lawsuit against them and argued on behalf of the Little Mahoning Watershed. "We feel that we should be able to speak for the hellbender salamander, plant, water, whatever," says Judy. "We need to give a voice to the voiceless,"

Then, in March 2020, their fierce resistance successfully compelled the first-ever enforcement of a local Rights of Nature law in the United States, when the Pennsylvania Department of

Environmental Protection revoked Pennsylvania General Energy's permit to dump its waste in Grant Township citing their home rule charter that bans such activity and asserts the rights of local ecosystems.

The legal victory is a win not just for the people of Grant Township, but also for the eastern hellbender salamander, and other communities fighting to protect their natural resources from the fossil fuel industry. The victory is also a win for the Rights for Nature movement, which has been spreading across the globe in recent years. Over the last decade, courts, legislatures, and various bodies of government in several countries have won ecosystem protection cases by granting rights to nature. In 2008, Ecuador became the first country in the world to formally recognize and implement the Rights of Nature and in 2017, New Zealand granted its Whanganui River legal personhood rights.

With many communities feeling alone and helpless in their fight to protect the ecosystems they rely on from exploitation, the legal victory in Grant Township serves as proof that even a small group of regular people can protect natural resources from large-scale threats.

2023 UPDATE: The fate of Grant township's home rule charter will soon be decided by the commonwealth court of Pennsylvania. It was overturned by this same court, but an appeal brought it to the supreme court of Pennsylvania, where it was bounced back to the commonwealth court. This case will decide if Grant Township's home rule charter will continue to protect the people of Grant Township and serve as a beacon of hope for small towns everywhere, or will fail as so many others have before.

Even in this dark moment, the people of Grant township refuse to give up. "As long as I can live and breathe I will fight this thing," says Judy.