

Ohio Revolution, Ohio Environmental Council, Sierra Club Ohio Chapter, Athens County Frack Action Network, Columbus Community Bill of Rights
[“Organizing Non-Violent Direct Action for Wayne National Forest”](#)

October 27, 2016

- Preparation meeting – October 23, 2016 – 1 hour
- Research to put together presentation – 4 hours
- Coalition meeting – 2 hours
- Action at Portman’s office – November 3, 2016 – 2 hours

In mid-October, it came to my attention that the Bureau of Land Management had approved leases of parcels in Wayne National Forest for fracking, and had scheduled an online auction for December 13. Several environmental groups in Ohio have long been tracking this issue as there has been rumblings that this might happen for a long time, but now it has become a reality.

A progressive political group I am affiliated with called Ohio Revolution started circulating a social media meme about this, which got 1.3 million views on Facebook, and an action alert that got 3000 signups, all within a week. This got the attention of Ohio Environmental Council, which was circulating a petition that had 8,800 signatures. Meanwhile, activists with Columbus Community Bill of Rights was talking with the Athens County Frack Action Network, which for the past several years has led resistance to fracking in Wayne National Forest on the ground.

Because I have an interest in environmental issues, the leaders of Ohio Revolution asked me for advice on where to take this issue. Together we decided to hold an organizing meeting for all parties interested in resisting fracking in Wayne National Forest to come together and plan a coordinated strategy. I also advised them to include the Sierra Club Ohio Chapter, which has been working with groups like Center for Biological Diversity and Friends of the Earth to file legal responses to BLM’s draft and final environmental assessments.

We announced a meeting for the evening of Thursday, October 27, invited representatives from the key organizations to attend, and posted the event on social media. We also created a group on Facebook where everyone could discuss any actions and work together.

The Sunday before the main meeting, I met with a few people from Our Revolution to decide how to structure the meeting. In talking to Jen Miller of the Sierra Club, I became aware that there were tensions between some of the groups, and I wanted to make sure we structured the meeting so that these conflicts did not hinder progress. To that end, we decided the two leaders of Our Revolution would lead the meeting, I would do a short presentation about where the issue stands now, and then we would go around the room and let someone from each organization give its perspective. Only then would we discuss an action plan for the Dec. 13 fracking auction.

As it turned out, Our Revolution had its own personnel issues. This organization was formed from people who had volunteered on the Bernie Sanders campaign, many of whom saw climate as a pivotal issue of our time, which is why they were interested in organizing a response to fracking in Wayne National Forest. However, one volunteer who had never been involved in environmental issues in any way suddenly decided she wanted to run the show. She was known by other volunteers to be an attention hog, and here was an issue bound to get a lot of attention. She absolutely insisted that the meeting be held at her house, while others insisted that it be held on neutral turf. Eventually after I started tossing technical report after technical report into the conversation, she got bored and decided she didn’t have time for this meeting after all.

Finally October 27 arrived, and I had to put together a short presentation on events leading up to the announcement of the lease sale for fracking in Wayne National Forest. Knowing that groups like Athens County Frack Action Network had been involved with this issue for a long time, I knew I had to get the details right. I spent four hours over the course of two days researching and writing the handouts for my presentation, and still didn't feel as if I fully understood it. But I knew all the other groups would be able to add to it before we started discussing an action plan. (See handouts attached to this writeup.)

One thing I realized in putting this information together is that we were coming on board very late in the process, after the final Environmental Assessment had been filed. This made me appreciate all the more the environmental groups that had been tracking this issue from the beginning and filing legal responses as well as organizing active resistance. I am not sure how much we can do at this point to stop this from happening, but it's still important to speak up.

Thanks to our planning for the October 27 meeting, it went really well. Jason Edwards and Puja Datta started by introducing Our Revolution and listing what they could offer. By then the meme had gotten 4 million views and they had 4000 people signed up to take action. In addition they have a mailing list of 16,000. They also discussed their connections to Josh Fox of Gasland, who they thought they could get to come to Columbus for an event around this, to NextGen, the Tom Steyer organization that had also put out an email and petition about Wayne fracking, and to media outlets such as The Young Turks, Free Press and Democracy Now.

After my presentation, Brian Kaiser of OEC discussed their plans to appeal the Environmental Assessment. He thinks they have a good case because the BLM had not done a full Environmental Impact Statement despite the impact to climate and species in the area. Brian said OEC could help with legal citizen actions but could not be involved in civil disobedience.

Andrea Reik and Heather Cantino of ACFAN then talked about all they had been doing to counter Wayne fracking. They had met many times with the forest supervisor and provided peer reviewed studies about fracking. They organized letter writing and petitions, put up an anti-fracking billboard on Route 33, and even showed up at the forest office last Christmas dressed as elves singing anti-fracking songs. Because of their work, BLM decided to open the first parcels for fracking in the Marietta unit of the forest near the Ohio River rather than the Athens unit.

Jen Miller of Sierra Club talked about the possibility of getting the U.S. Forest Service, which manages Wayne National Forest, to withdraw consent for the BLM to lease parcels for fracking. She said this approach has worked in areas out west but hasn't been tried in the east. She thinks there is a good case to file a NEPA lawsuit because the BLM's final Environmental Assessment said there would be no impact to the water, but that is never the case with fracking. She also said there are a lot of legacy coal mines in the area that fracking operations could accidentally drill into, releasing coal pollution. Protection of bobcats could also be an issue. Jen added that the Sierra Club has done a lot of NEPA lawsuits, but again those were all out west and that it would be expensive, up to \$100,000 because it requires hiring so many scientific experts.

From here we discussed a number of possibilities for action moving forward. Ideas included:

- Creating a meme for a call and letter writing campaign targeting Kathleen Atkinson, eastern regional director for USFS, asking her to withdraw consent for fracking
- Getting people to hike through the forest to get pictures of it in its pristine state, and photos of themselves in the forest holding signs that say "Don't frack Wayne"

- Raising money to help pay the costs for filing a NEPA lawsuit
- Canvassing the Marietta area to let people know this was happening and get their signatures on a petition against it – a woman named Elizabeth was very keen on this
- Get Josh Fox to come to Columbus for an event highlighting the plan to frack the Wayne
- Social media posts using the hashtag #KeepWayneWild
- Protest events in front of the offices of Rob Portman and Sherrod Brown

On November 3, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., we held the first action in front of Rob Portman's office. About 15 people showed up, three of them with drums. This helped us sing songs and chants that [got a lot of attention from passers-by](#) on foot and in cars. Many people had made [wonderful signs](#) about selling off Wayne National Forest for fracking. However, I don't know if the event had any effect on anyone in Portman's office. While events like this are a lot of fun and build a lot of feelings of solidarity among participants, I am not sure it had any actual effect. Next time I may push to organize a meeting with Portman's office first so we can express our concerns that way. Then if we don't get any action, we can move onto street theater.

We also started a new meme asking people to email Kathleen Atkinson and request that she to withdraw consent for fracking in Wayne National Forest. The meme got 40,000 views in a month, but I am not sure how many people actually wrote the email. Most action alerts I've gotten include a pre-written message that I can modify if I like, but I don't have to write the letter myself. I just fill in my name and address and send. Later the Sierra Club [issued an action alert](#) of this sort on Wayne fracking, but Our Revolution does not have access to this technology.

Jason and Puja may have talked to Josh Fox about Wayne fracking, but with all the attention first on the election, then on the protests at Standing Rock, North Dakota, he likely hasn't had time to come to Columbus. Due to these things, I lost track of the Wayne National Forest issue myself for several weeks. As previously noted, the election and holidays intervened, and the Standing Rock protests took the spotlight off Wayne fracking. This will help the BLM sell these leases, which may be why they scheduled the auction for December 13, typically a busy time of year.

Fortunately the environmental organizations we were working with stayed on top of the issue. Besides the Sierra Club sending out an action alert targeting Kathleen Atkinson, OEC sent out an alert [targeting President Obama](#), and ACFAN presented [its own petition](#) on change.org with over 90,000 signatures in person at the [BLM offices in Washington, DC](#). There is also another protest planned for Sherrod Brown's office on December 8.

Working on this issue this semester has taught me a few things. First, while the environmental organizations don't always get along, they do seem to have carved out niches for themselves of the kinds of actions they participate in, and they stay on top of the issue regardless. Second, newcomers like Our Revolution need to get certain capabilities such as the ability to send out action alerts. Social media reach and contacts with famous people are good but not enough.

Third, it's more effective to dovetail actions together to build up pressure over time. For example, we could start with petitions and emails through action alerts, then elevate to phone calls, then meet with the targeted office, then hold highly visible protests and make sure the media has notification. Finally, don't lose track of an issue. Keep a calendar and identify deliverables and dates by which they are due, and know when to follow up. Although we didn't do a lot of things right on this issue the experience will help us moving into the future.