

Environment

Frackers vs the people: 'We are the ones who will suffer'

How residents in the tiny Colombian village of Santa Teresa are standing up to a state-run oil company



People stage a demonstration against the use of fracking in Bogotá, Colombia



By Inigo Alexander

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Flanked by kilometres of broad silver pipelines and sandwiched between large oil extraction sites in Colombia's northern region of Santander, lies the tiny community of Santa Teresa. The village, on the outskirts of the town of Puerto Wilches, is not much to look at. It is made up of a cluster of colourful, single-storey homes dotted along dusty streets leading to the vast palm plantations that dominate the area.

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Santa Teresa has a small primary school, a bar and simple shop, but no running water or sewage system. The water well lies abandoned at the side of the football pitch – out of use since 2018, only months after it was installed. Instead, many homes in Santa Teresa have home-made wells which supply families with dirty, polluted water. Locals have little choice but to use this water for drinking and washing.

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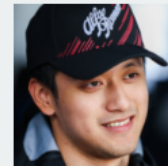
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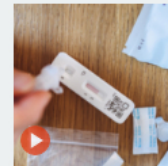
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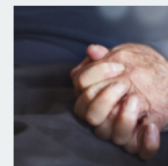
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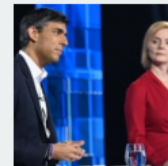
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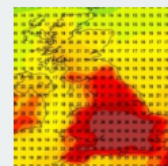
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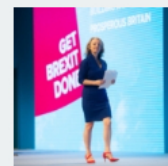
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"Life is tough here. We're surviving, not living," says a Santa Teresa community leader, who chose to remain anonymous over safety concerns. The village of around 600 people is one of many local communities on the front line of Colombia's toxic debate over fracking.

Santa Teresa, and Puerto Wilches itself – a town of 35,000 on the Magdalena River – have been embroiled in the fight for months. Communities are concerned about the wider impact of the explorative oil extraction process – which involves injecting a mix of water, sand and various chemicals into the ground in order to access oil reserves deep below the surface.



On 28 March, Colombia's environmental regulator green-lit the development of the country's first fracking pilot project, spearheaded by the state-run oil company Ecopetrol

"The pollution is what concerns us, the environmental impact," the local leader said. "We would be more vulnerable, water would no longer be of use and crops could be affected. We fear there will be more pollution."

On 28 March, Colombia's environmental regulator green-lit the development of the country's first fracking pilot project, spearheaded by the state-run oil company Ecopetrol. The project was designed to assess the viability and impact of fracking in the area, before a decision is taken on whether to run projects on a commercial scale.

If the pilot projects prove successful, Ecopetrol aims to build between 100 and 250 extraction wells across 40 different sites throughout the Puerto Wilches area. The Colombian government estimates there are between three billion and nine billion barrels of oil stored in non-conventional deposits, which are accessible through fracking.

Ecopetrol argues unlocking these reserves would allow Colombia access to oil reserves that would provide another 22 years' worth of supply. In mid-April, a judge suspended the project's licence claiming local communities had been excluded from the consultation process – a legal obligation in Colombia for such projects. Yet that decision was reversed by the courts in early June.

"When the pilot projects were approved again, the community in Puerto Wilches felt a lot of anger, a lot of discomfort and a lot of discontent. There was a big strike, they demonstrated, closed the roads and protested against the court's decision," says Leonardo Gutiérrez, 66, a local opponent of fracking and member of the committee advising the pilot projects.

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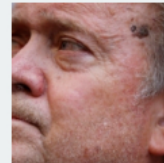
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A quick stroll through Puerto Wilches reveals palpable anger over the plans, with a number of murals, posters, and graffiti proclaiming the town's unofficial slogan: no al fracking – no to fracking.

Locals fear fracking in the area would pollute and disrupt key industries that underpin the economy. Vast palm plantations covering 60,000 hectares of the surrounding area are the town's biggest employer and industry leaders fear being linked to the process could jeopardise exports. The 2,200 fisherman who rely on nearby river and reservoirs to source the day's catch fear pollution could threaten their livelihood.



Vocal opposition comes with risk, as environmental activists across Santander have seen a rise in threats towards them

More than two-thirds (69 per cent) of Puerto Wilches residents are opposed to fracking in their area, according to the Petroleum Barometer study conducted by Colombia's Petroleum and Gas Association. One local described Ecopetrol's efforts to engage with residents as a "farce".

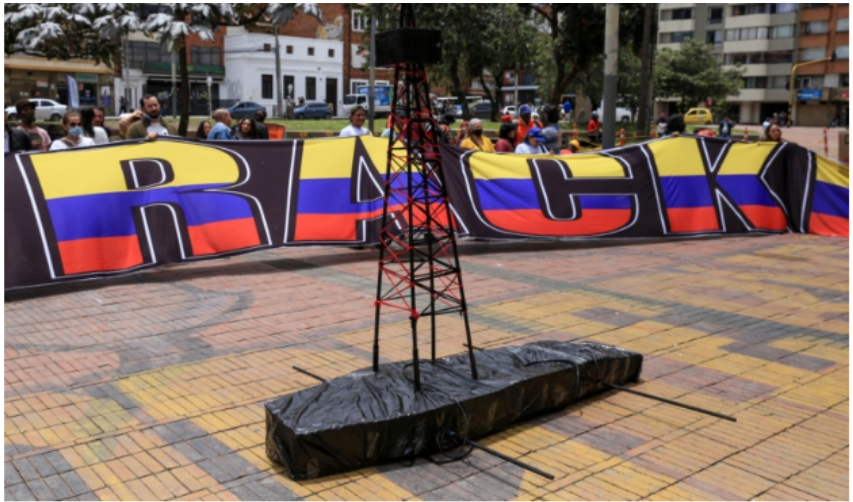
"We are the ones who will suffer while those who benefit are in a perfumed office back in Bogotá, they are not really going to suffer the impact," says Alexander Agudelo, a community leader and resident of El Pedral, a community near a prospective fracking site.

Vocal opposition comes with risk, as environmental activists across Santander have seen a rise in threats towards them. Earlier this year, a 21-year-old activist was forced to seek exile in France after receiving death threats.

But Karen Zetuain Medina, a resident of the small town of Kilómetro Ocho on the outskirts of Puerto Wilches, refuses to give in. "Resistance is hard because sometimes you feel scared," she says.

"Either you submit to threats or you give up the fight. I decided that whether they threaten me or not, whether they kill me or not, it doesn't matter because I'm doing it for a better Colombia."





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Colombia's president-elect Gustavo Petro – preparing to assume power on 7 August – has publicly opposed fracking and vowed to end it. So Puerto Wilches residents face a nervous wait. But, as Mr Gutiérrez points out, they have already made their own position perfectly clear: “The community voted en masse for Petro with the hope that he keeps his word and bans the fracking projects.”



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