

Fayette County Farmer Spends Weekend In Jail

Monday, December 17, 2012
The Beaver County Times, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania
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Joe Bezzak of Nicolson Township speaks with reporters following his release from from Fayette County Prison on Monday morning.

UNIONTOWN, PA — Joe Bezzak said when he traveled to Uniontown on Friday for a hearing regarding an apparent violation of a court order, he never expected to go to jail.

But that is exactly where the 73-year-old Nicholson Township man spent the weekend, all for speaking to employees of a gas pipeline company working on Bezzak's own farm against the court's direction.

"I was told by Judge (Nancy D.) Vernon that I wasn't allowed to speak to them, even though they were working on my property and even though I saw them doing things that were wrong. I talked to them, so I went to jail," Bezzak said after he was released from Fayette County Prison at 9 a.m. Monday.

Bezzak, who worked as an educator in Fayette County for nearly four decades, said that his problems with Laurel Mountain Midstream of **Williams Companies LLC** began in the spring when he signed a contract with them to allow a pipeline to be placed on his 700-acre farm.

Initially, he said, the company appeared to be working hand-in-hand with him, having Bezzak review plans for the pipeline and working in conjunction with his needs for his cattle farm. But that cooperation quickly dissipated, Bezzak said.

"At first, they send someone into befriend you and then they take advantage of you... I run 200 head of black Angus cattle," Bezzak said, fighting back tears. "This has been a passion of mine," he said, noting that he began his farm with just three cows and built his entire herd from breeding.

He went on to say that once the pipeline crews came onto his property, they took down part of his fence without informing him, and then, over the coming months, tore down other sections of fence and put the pipeline across his land, causing issues for his cattle to move from one area of the farm to another. He said that as a result, several of his calves and one cow died. Peaceful confrontations between the pipeline crews and Bezzak continued, he said, as he grew angrier at the company that he felt was running roughshod over his farmland.

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However, as the company and Bezjak went back and forth about the fence and other issues, Vernon also ordered Bezjak to not speak to the workers on his property.

Bezjak said he tried to follow that order and was busy contacting the state Department of Environmental Protection for other possible violations when he realized recently that the company was pumping sulfur water onto his property.

At that point, Bezjak told the men to leave his property.

“I was fed up. It is lie, after lie, after lie... I couldn’t stop myself from getting involved,” he said. “That is my property and I am an environmentalist. I am not against drilling but I do believe in being a good steward of the land.”

On Friday, Bezjak said he was due in court for a hearing regarding the ongoing dispute.

He said that he brought in money to go Christmas shopping after the hearing, and that prior to going to court, he dropped off a neighbor and friend at Uniontown Hospital for chemotherapy, telling him that he would be back to pick him up. Instead, he said, he was placed in handcuffs and hauled to jail.

Another family friend, David Headley of Smithfield, was able to pick up the man at the hospital and take him home. Headley was among a few people who gathered outside the prison to await Bezjak’s release and protest his imprisonment.

Bezjak said that during his weekend in prison, he was “treated very well” and said that it was interesting because three of the guards and three of the prisoners were former students.

“It is a different world in there and it was something to experience,” he said.

In the end, Bezjak said he takes the blame himself because he signed a lease agreement with the company initially, but added that he said he will continue to fight for what is right.

“I did learn what amen means while I was in jail. I was reading the Bible and it is a Jewish term that means whatever was said here is true and honest. I say amen here today, because my story is true,” Bezjak said.