



## He wanted to help Snitz Creek. Instead, he watched Sunoco pollute it

**Russ Collins is hoping to make sure the restoration project is not a lost opportunity**

**Rachel McDevitt, StateImpact Pennsylvania**

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Whenever long-time fly fisherman Russ Collins looks at streams around Lebanon County, the wheels in his head are turning about how to protect them from pollution and help them run faster to flush out sediment.

“There’s a saying that everybody lives downstream from somebody else,” Collins said. “And it is important to take care of the water in your own footprint so that the next person down doesn’t have to deal with the pollution issues.”

Collins has spent his retirement working with the Doc Fritchey Chapter of Trout Unlimited to get grant money for restoration projects and meeting with landowners to convince them to let the work happen.

But one project has been almost taunting him.

It involves a stretch of Snitz Creek in West Cornwall Township, where Sunoco needed to cross with its Mariner East pipeline.

The line carries volatile natural gas liquids from Marcellus Shale fields in Ohio and western Pennsylvania through 17 counties to the Marcus Hook industrial complex in Delaware County.



*In this 2018 file photo, Energy Transfer, the parent company of Mariner East 2 pipeline builder, Sunoco, works at Snitz Creek in West Cornwall Township, Lebanon County after a drilling mud spill during the summer.*

It was beset with problems from the start in 2017. Construction crews repeatedly spilled mud used to drill the pipeline route in lakes and streams across the state. Some areas reported sinkholes and drinking water contamination.



*This photograph of Snitz Creek in Lebanon County, taken with a drone in August 2021, shows restoration work done by Sunoco after drilling for its Mariner East pipeline resulted in multiple spills of drilling mud over the length of construction at the site.*

Ultimately, the state would fine Sunoco and its parent company Energy Transfer more than \$20 million for 120 violations along the 350 mile-long pipeline.

Sunoco would pay nearly \$1.5 million for environmental incidents that include 16 violations in Lebanon County.

Energy Transfer is now facing charges of environmental crimes from the Attorney General.



*Russ Collins stands for a portrait in Quittie Creek Nature Park in Annville on October 19, 2021. © Rachel McDevitt / StateImpact Pennsylvania*

*Rachel McDevitt, "He wanted to help Snitz Creek. Instead, he watched Sunoco pollute it," © StateImpact Pennsylvania, Dec. 8, 2021, p. 3.*

At the heart of these incidents are people like Russ Collins, who watched in real time as Sunoco's mistakes threatened places they love.

## 'Take your pictures and get off'

A few years ago, Collins was trying to get landowners along a stretch of Snitz Creek in West Cornwall Township on board with a restoration project.

He had agreement from all the landowners except one whose land includes Sunoco's right-of-way. He's not sure why that person held out. Reached by phone, the landowner said he didn't remember being approached about a restoration project. Snitz Creek is a cold-water trout stream that's classified as "impaired" by the state, mainly because of agricultural runoff. Still, the Snitz and other creeks in the watershed attract fishermen from across the state.

Collins knew Sunoco would soon move in with the Mariner East project, and he was hoping they could work side-by-side.



*Snitz Creek runs behind Clay Collins' home in West Cornwall Township in this photo from Oct. 26, 2021.  
© Rachel McDevitt / StateImpact Pennsylvania*



*Sunoco used long plastic tubes to divert Snitz Creek while it finished laying pipe in the area.*

But when the company started drilling, Collins started getting calls from neighbors.

“Saying, you know, ‘There’s this orange stuff coming down the creek. What is it?’ So, I went out to investigate,” Collins said.

One of those calling was Clay Collins. He and Russ Collins aren’t related, but say they’re “friends that found each other through a common cause.”



*Sunoco crews are seen here containing a spill of orange bentonite clay.*

Clay Collins’ backyard slopes down to meet the creek. It’s like a sanctuary for him: peaceful and full of wildlife like deer, birds, and foxes.

He spends a lot of time on a favorite bench that overlooks Snitz Creek. Usually it’s clear, but after the drilling crews moved in, Clay noticed the water getting cloudy. He saw it happen about a dozen times over the few years Sunoco was working.

“And not that it’s my creek, but I feel some responsibility,” he said. “I didn’t want anything wrong to happen to it.”

When he noticed the spills, Clay would run down to the crew working to tell them. Some were responsive and explained the problem, but others would just tell Clay to get off the right-of-way.

One called the sheriff after Russ Collins wouldn’t stop taking pictures of the site. He said the sheriff told him to “take your pictures and get off.”



*Sunoco spilled drilling mud dozens of times into Snitz Creek during the years it was working.  
Photo by Russ Collins.*

Russ had wanted to help the creek, but he had to stand by while crews made mistake after mistake. All he could do was take pictures. He said he made it his job.

His photos show long plastic tubes used to divert the water while Sunoco drilled underneath the creek bed, and of crews trying to sop up bright orange bentonite clay.

Bentonite is a non-toxic material used to lubricate drilling machines. In large amounts, it could kill small aquatic life that larger fish eat. If it coats the bottom of the creek, trout can't build the rock nests they use to lay their eggs.

The drilling mud spills happened over and over – more, even, than were reported at the time.



*The Doc Fritchey Chapter of Trout Unlimited narrowed this stretch of Snitz Creek in North Cornwall Township and planted trees along the banks for its first restoration project on the creek, seen in this photo from Oct. 19, 2021. © Rachel McDevitt, StateImpact Pennsylvania.*

In February, the Department of Environmental Protection fined Sunoco nearly \$500,000 for dozens of Lebanon County incidents in 2020. The agency said Sunoco reported 12 spills in September and October, but did not tell it about 32 losses of circulation between May and August. A loss of circulation is when liquid used to drill doesn't come back up to the surface. As part of that penalty, Sunoco had to create a cleanup plan for the Snitz Creek area.

Russ Collins, who had wanted to fix up the creek long before, was angry at the many mistakes.

"You don't want me to say how I felt," he said.

Sunoco's problems in Lebanon County aren't unique. A recent grand jury detailed evidence of sinkholes, spills, and drinking water contamination in 11 counties during the four years of construction along the statewide route.

Attorney General Josh Shapiro has since charged parent company Energy Transfer with 48 counts of environmental crimes.

## Hidden problems

Activists who organized against the Mariner East during construction say the real extent of the damage Sunoco caused is hard to pin down.

That's in part because it's hard to quantify the amount of mud spilled into porous limestone geology in Lebanon and Chester counties, but also because some people who were directly affected were reluctant to speak out.

Ann Pinca, president of Lebanon Pipeline Awareness, said she would hear from people whose wells were dirtied or land was damaged when they were looking for help. But then they would disappear, or stop talking about it.

"I am not going to fault people for signing a nondisclosure agreement to get the financial reparations they need for their property, but it does make it very difficult to bring to light the problems that happen with pipeline construction," Pinca said.

Pam Bishop formed Concerned Citizens of Lebanon County after learning of Sunoco's request for an exemption from local zoning for a pump station near her home. As an attorney, Bishop had argued before the Public Utility Commission, which regulates pipelines. Without her legal background and good timing at a township supervisor's meeting, she wouldn't have been able to recognize Sunoco's petition.

She spent six years in a legal fight with Sunoco over those claims while trying to raise awareness of pipeline safety risks. Her group says many people likely still don't know all the details of the project, because a lot of the information is complicated or confidential.

"If you read hundreds of pages of reports you can find out that, yes, there were at least three people who had complained about...dirty water for their drinking water. But, of course, we couldn't talk to those people," Bishop said.

Bishop said the reports say the people affected were satisfied with Sunoco's efforts to replace their water.

## Prime spot

Mariner East construction is finished in Lebanon County. The bentonite clay has since washed away. There were no fish kills in the area.

It's unclear if there will be any long-term impacts. The local Trout Unlimited chapter and Quittapahilla Watershed Association started monitoring water health in Snitz Creek just last fall.

Russ Collins said Sunoco has been cooperative with Trout Unlimited as they work to restore other streams. Now that the drillers are gone, he'd like to get back to the project he almost started years ago.

"That's high on our priority list because it was our prime spot to get something done on the Snitz Creek. That was our number one project," he said.

Collins is proud of the work he's already done in the county. His face lights up near the water.

But his eyes take on a faraway look when he sees Snitz Creek and thinks of what could be done.

He lost his first chance here. He doesn't know when or if he'll get another.