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## Murrysville firm awarded for gas well methane leak detection device

[patrick.varine@tribweb.com](mailto:patrick.varine@tribweb.com)

PATRICK VARINE ([MAILTO:PVARINE@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: MURRYSVILLE FIRM AWARDED FOR GAS WELL METHANE LEAK DETECTION DEVICE](mailto:PVARINE@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: MURRYSVILLE FIRM AWARDED FOR GAS WELL METHANE LEAK DETECTION DEVICE)

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

A PixController OMEDS methane sensor sits atop an abandoned gas well at Hillman State Park in Washington County. The U.S. Department of Energy is monitoring the wells and receiving wireless data updates regularly from the sensor.

Updated 12 minutes ago

A Murrysville company is gaining federal and international recognition for developing a product that can wirelessly monitor and transmit data on methane leaks at active and abandoned gas well sites.

Earlier this spring, PixController's Optical Methane Emissions Detection System (OMEDS) won the LoRa Alliance's second annual Global "Internet of Things" Challenge for Innovation, held in Barcelona, Spain. The alliance is an association of 400 companies that support the LoRaWAN standard for low-power wide area networks, a way for battery-operated devices to wirelessly transmit data efficiently.



The challenge asked companies to incorporate LoRaWAN technology into a concept "focused on creating a safer and smarter sustainable world."

PixController had been developing its detection system since 2011 in response to Obama-era environmental regulations that required gas companies to begin tracking "fugitive emissions. Company President Bill Powers thought it was a perfect device to enter in the challenge.

"Initially we were looking at monitoring at active well sites," Powers said. "But we didn't have the proper certification for it, and getting a source of methane can be expensive. I have an old well on my property, and so we just set a sensor up on that old well."

What they found was significant methane leakage.

"We started looking at more abandoned wells — they're leaking methane more than people realize," Powers said.

PixController has battery-powered, solar-charged wireless monitors set up on abandoned well sites in Murrysville Community Park and at Hillman State Park in Washington County.

The Hillman wells are being monitored by the U.S. Department of Energy's National Energy Technology Laboratory (NETL) through an agreement with the state's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

"What we're hoping is to understand a little better how much emissions can vary over time and what parameters affect those emissions," said NETL research engineer Natalie Pekney. "So we're testing them at two wells right now, but if budget and schedule allows, we'd like to buy more (PixController sensors) and deploy them at other wells."

One of the Hillman wells and the Murrysville Community Park well are emitting "fugitive" methane at a level that reaches its lower explosive limit, about 50,000 parts per million.

Powers said the OMEDS system can help keep a constant eye on both abandoned and active well sites, supplying real-time data that would be useful to both environmental groups like the DEP and drilling companies, which regularly employ workers to detect methane leaks.

"It's more costly to send a person out there to take a measurement, come back and write it down, and there are inaccuracies that can happen," Powers said. "This is continuous and more cost-effective."

In addition to winning the LoRa Alliance challenge, the OMEDS system has earned PixController a \$25,000 grant from the Shale Gas Innovation and Commercialization Center and a \$30,000 grant from Innovation Works and the state's Department of Community and Economic Development. It also captured a \$20,000 second-place prize in the Dell Internet of Things contest, held last year.

Powers also envisions the OMEDS system as a way to monitor the past and the future of gas drilling.

"If there is hydrofracking done near some of this old well infrastructure, is there geologic interaction between them and do those old wells start emitting more methane?" he asked. "This can help us find out."

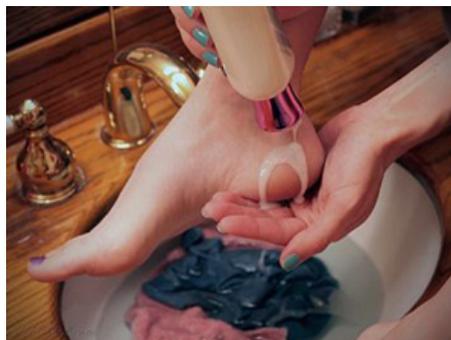
Patrick Varine is a staff writer for the Tribune-Review. He can be reached at 724-850-2862, [pvarine@tribweb.com](mailto:pvarine@tribweb.com) (<mailto:pvarine@tribweb.com>) or via Twitter [@MurrysvilleStar](https://twitter.com/MurrysvilleStar) (<https://twitter.com/MurrysvilleStar>).

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