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While larger companies are buying up stakes in the Marcellus Shale field, an oil and gas firm with regional headquarters in Charleston is taking the opposite approach.

Houston-based **EnerVest** has been quietly purchasing older, reliable gas wells throughout the Appalachian region.

"We've taken the contrarian view," said Ken Mariani, senior vice president and general manager of EnerVest's Eastern Division. "A lot of companies are focused on the unconventional shale, which are higher-risk, higher-reward opportunities. We've been aggregating the conventional production the bigger players have lost interest in."

The strategy seems to be paying off.

Last week, **EnerVest** announced it was expanding its Charleston office. The company plans to add 20 administrative jobs during the next several months, after recently acquiring 3,000 wells in Ohio.

EnerVest - already the largest oil and gas operator in Ohio - paid \$300 million to buy the wells from Range Resources Corp. The deal will increase the Eastern Division's gas wells to 13,000 and acreage position to 2 million acres.

The Charleston office expects to hire engineers, geologists, accountants and land administration personnel. EnerVest's Eastern Division now has about 75 employees, all housed at the Kanawha Valley Bank Building in downtown Charleston.

"All of our administrative and operational management functions are done here in Charleston," said Mariani, who joined **EnerVest** 10 years ago. "These are all professional, good-paying jobs."

Last November, **EnerVest** purchased 3,000 gas wells in Pennsylvania and Ohio

from EXCO Resources of Dallas, also prompting a Charleston office expansion.

Some of EnerVest's new employees formerly worked for other natural gas companies that have moved administrative operations out of the Kanawha Valley to their corporate headquarters or to western Pennsylvania to be closer to the Marcellus Shale formation. Some experts believe the Marcellus formation could become the nation's most productive gas field.

"You have everybody going after the shales," Mariani said. "It's very heated, a lot of competition."

Instead, **EnerVest** consolidates existing companies that have reliable wells. Because the wholesale price of natural gas has been falling since July 2008, many companies have become more willing to exit the market.

"We purchase properties when they're for sale, and we have found it a wonderful opportunity," Mariani said. "It's been a niche for us to aggregate conventional production."

Privately owned, **EnerVest** raises money from big institutional investors like pension funds and insurance companies, then plows that capital into oil and gas exploration and production.

The company started in 1992 and has grown to more than 600 employees, with 18,000 wells in 12 states.

Within its Appalachian operations, **Enervest** has field offices in Weston, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. The company operates about 600 gas wells in West Virginia.

Photo courtesy of **EnerVest**
Charleston-based Eastern Division now manages 13,000 gas wells. **EnerVest** focuses on buying up older, reliable wells, instead of the more risky Marcellus Shale play.

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