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The Washington Times

'Don't frack with our water,' say foes

Battles fought at town meetings

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The Washington Times

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WASHINGTON, Pa. — "Don't frack with our water!"

For those who see a darker side to the Marcellus Shale natural gas drilling industry transforming these parts, that has become the new local rallying cry.

Opponents of the mining technique of hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," fear the contamination of water supplies, worried it will forever ruin small communities in the stampede of billion-dollar outsider energy corporations to make a quick buck.

Their concerns are not entirely unfounded. Last week, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) levied the largest fine in state history against an oil or gas company, hitting Chesapeake Energy with more than \$1 million in penalties for contaminating water supplies in Bradford County, Pa., last year and for an explosion at a well site in Washington County, Pa., in February.

The DEP has fined other companies for similar water-contamination incidents in years past. Maryland Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler this month announced plans to sue Chesapeake, the country's second-largest natural gas producer, for an April 19 "well control incident" in Bradford County. Mr. Gansler said the spill resulted in contaminants flowing into Towanda Creek, which feeds into Susquehanna River and, ultimately, the Chesapeake Bay.

While agreeing to the settlement, the company has denied responsibility for any contamination beyond a small pond near the site of the accident. Chesapeake officials argue they have done thorough testing of the Towanda Creek and Susquehanna River and found no problems.

It is unclear what data Mr. Gansler is relying on to justify the suit, expected to be filed in August. Calls to his spokeswoman were not returned.

David Yoxtheimer, a hydrologist with Pennsylvania State University's Marcellus Center for Outreach and Research, said the lawsuit seems "a bit frivolous" in an interview Wednesday.

"Chesapeake and the DEP have done sampling. ... What we're seeing is any environmental impact has been minimal," he said.

But that argument may not hold up in the court of public opinion, particularly when the companies operating here remain tight-lipped about their operations. Chesapeake, for example, did not respond to phone calls or emails from The Washington Times, with the exception of providing written statements after last week's fines

were announced.

Matt Pitzarella, spokesman for Range Resources, one of the largest players in the industry, believes there is a "highly organized, highly motivated base of opposition" to gas drilling. Organizations like the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund visit small towns and work with local officials to draft ordinances designed to keep gas companies out, he said.

The organization's spokeswoman, Mari Margil, did not return phone calls or emails from The Times. Its website calls gas drilling a "threat."

Industry insiders dismiss such critics as "astroturfers"- activists who travel from town to town and stir up opposition at small township meetings. One Range Resources employee joked about carpooling with them, since they often end up at the same gatherings.

Critics of the industry live in a dream world where solar and wind power completely replace so-called "dirty" fossil fuels like oil, gas and coal, said Tom Ridge, former Pennsylvania governor and Department of Homeland Security secretary and current adviser to the Marcellus Shale Coalition.

"That world will never exist. You have to ignore those folks," Mr. Ridge said. "Accidents will happen. If you're going to make the perfect the enemy of the good, that's the wrong mindset."

Mr. Yoxthimer said concerns about chemicals used in the fracking process have been "overblown." Opponents contend that hundreds of chemicals are combined into a witch's brew, destined to destroy clean drinking water.

But Range Resources' website lists the four chemicals it mixes with water and sand for fracking. Those chemicals make up 0.14 percent of the fracking concoction, according to company officials.

Mr. Yoxthimer said such openness is important, and the industry should be as transparent as possible going forward. He also said incidents like the Bradford County water contamination cannot be taken lightly, and companies must continue to improve their safety practices.

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