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October 18, 2010

The controversy surrounding the recent revelation that the fundraising apparatus of Binghamton University entered into a \$1.4 million lease deal with a large natural gas company illustrates the importance of sensitivity when dealing with the highly-charged issue of hydraulic fracturing. The controversy surrounding the recent revelation that the fundraising apparatus of Binghamton University entered into a \$1.4 million lease deal with a large natural gas company illustrates the importance of sensitivity when dealing with the highly-charged issue of hydraulic fracturing. The news of the lease — two years after the deal was struck — elicited student protests and marred Binghamton's image with respect to environmental concerns even though hydraulic fracturing never actually occurred.

This controversy should serve as a cautionary tale as Cornell continues to gather

information about the environmental, social and economic effects of natural gas drilling on the Marcellus Shale. In leasing the mineral rights to a 563-acre property in Union, N.Y., in 2008, Binghamton exhibited how a lack of transparency can easily enrage students and community members alike. Considering the passion shown on both sides of this issue, it's vital that Cornell be exceedingly sensitive and transparent in all its drilling-related actions.

Last winter, Cornell issued a moratorium on making any decision to lease its land for natural gas drilling. In a statement announcing the moratorium, Vice President for University Communications Tommy Bruce wrote that the University will await the establishment of federal and state guidelines on gas drilling that “conform to the high environmental standards the university holds for the stewardship of its property.” This wait and see approach is a wise one, as it allows Cornell to keep its options open while the environmental effects of this new technology are fully understood.

While some students and community members may want the University to take a stronger anti-fracking stance, this moratorium ensures that whatever decision President Skorton eventually makes will be one based on a comprehensive body of evidence, and not on emotions or public pressure. In the aforementioned statement, Bruce said, “The university will not agree to a process that we believe might constitute a threat to the environmental integrity of our property.” So if the evidence shows that hydrofracking might constitute an environmental threat — as anti-fracking activists already argue — the University must not lease its land for natural gas drilling.

The Environmental Protection Agency recently began a study on the environmental and health impacts of hydraulic fracturing with the intention of developing nationwide regulations. It completed a similar study in 2004 that has been criticized for being too generous to the energy industry, and activists on both sides of the debate have already criticized scientists involved with the EPA's current study for being predisposed to favor one side or the other. It is critical that the EPA's study be unbiased and unswayed by environmental fear-mongering and corporate profiteering alike. And if the EPA produces another flawed or incomplete study, Cornell has a responsibility to hold itself to higher standards regarding the use of its land while maintaining alignment with federal regulations.

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