

A controversy for state's geologist

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State geologist Langhorne B. "Taury" Smith Jr. discovered in recent days that sharing a controversial opinion publicly comes with career consequences.

He is being castigated by representatives of environmental groups and is under close scrutiny by his employer, the State Education

Department. He has become a target of attacks from activists opposed to the state pushing ahead with plans to allow natural gas to be extracted from deep shale recesses using a process called hydraulic fracturing.

In this column two Mondays ago, the 50-year-old Smith, who possesses a doctorate in geology, was quoted making supportive remarks about the hydrofracking process and benefits of the various drilling projects that are envisioned above the Marcellus Shale beds beneath parts of the Southern Tier and Catskills. His remarks were reprinted six days later in a pro-"fracking" editorial in the New York Post. "Those are exaggerated problems," he said about contamination reports cited in some news accounts about fracking, and added that water pollution near a few of the thousands of drill sites nationwide was unrelated to the natural gas extraction process. He called the Marcellus rock a "huge gift" because of its economic potential for a natural gas production substitute for coal.

Voices from across New York reacted, including representatives of Environmental Advocates and related groups opposing the horizontal drilling. "That's an irresponsible statement; people are getting sick and dying," asserted David Braun, a New York City activist with United For Action. Braun said Smith is clearly in the pocket of the gas industry and has spread that view in multiple email letters. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist; I am aware that when somebody is getting money from an industry it does sway opinion."

Similarly, Stephanie Low, a Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter "National Hydrofracking Team" member, has spread the word of her suspicions of Smith. "He works for the gas industry, so it might be extremely difficult for him to notice that most of his statements are not supported by the facts," she asserts. "Perhaps he doesn't read the (New York) Times." She works as a manager of a classical musician.

The Education Department will not allow Smith to talk to reporters now. Besides muzzling him, the department, which oversees his New York State Museum geology unit, won't permit him to take calls. Instead, the department provided a reporter a copy of its internal protocol for



handling media inquiries which says failure to check with the office of communications first would result in "appropriate administrative action."

Smith's new critics point to his name on the website of Ammonite Resources as a senior consultant. Ammonite President G. Warfield "Skip" Hobbs explains that Smith has never performed any work for the company and was never paid for any association with his firm. He has been on hand in case a project somewhere in the world demanding his geologic expertise arose.

He said people taking shots at Smith are involved in "character assassination." "We don't market ourselves to the fracking industry," he said. His company helps prospective investors in natural resources development projects. Clients tend to be Wall Street firms or insurance companies that want help conducting due diligence. Ammonite offers independent analysis on the potential of projects. Smith, he said, made it clear he would do no projects in New York or along the Pennsylvania border area. Hobbs, who has been an adviser to the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, said New York should be proud to include Smith among its government researchers because of his extraordinary scientific work and knowledge. Hobbs is president of the American Geological Institute, a federation of 49 geoscientific and professional associations that represents more than 120,000 geologists, geophysicists, and other earth scientists. He said Smith has won honors for his research papers and has demonstrated himself as an ecologist.

Smith, who has worked for the state for nearly 11 years, disclosed on the Ammonite website that he has done and does consulting for Saudi Aramco, Angola LNG, Shell, Texaco, Repsol, Devon, Encana and other clients. Education Department spokesman Jonathan Burman said SED is looking into those associations and "will take swift action as appropriate." None of the companies named have applied for the rights to drill in the Marcellus formation, according to state data.

Burman said Smith is not a policymaker. He started his state career as a senior geologist in 2000 at \$44,400 a year and has been promoted twice to his current \$93,700 position. However, he has been working part time (75 percent) since 2006 and it isn't clear whether he is allowed to do non-state research.

As part of his work with the state, he has been active working for NYSERDA under contracts with the State Museum. Smith, and others, are doing research on the gas potential in New York's Utica and in Marcellus shale for the public authority. NYSERDA is "neutral" on the drilling issue, a spokeswoman said. Smith has been studying Marcellus for three years.

Smith said he trusts the Department of Environmental Conservation to come up with strict rules, although he is sympathetic to people who are alarmed at the notion of permitting hydrofracking.

"Let's have a balanced look," he said before he was shut out to the press. "There is a downside:

Less than 1 percent of the land would no longer be green; lots of trucks, noise; view would be changed. Accidents will happen, but good regulation could minimize the impact."

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