

Let us beware of shortcuts

Fred LeBrun Commentary

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British Petroleum's runaway gusher in the Gulf of Mexico, described as the worst environmental disaster ever, offers a complicated set of lessons when it comes to drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus shale.

At the top of the list is that "proven technology" is not enough, not by a long shot. Off-shore drilling has been going on successfully for years all over the gulf. Just as hydrofracking for extracting natural gas has been in use for 60 years, including in New York, with little environmental damage. The technique at issue now, horizontal fracking, is more far-reaching, though the technology is basically the same.

But proven technology is only as good as the scruples and business plan of those utilizing it. Harnessing nuclear power is also proven technology, yet we have endured meltdowns at power plants.

How is that possible, given the consequences?

These disasters happen when shortcuts are taken, when government becomes complicit with industry and when oversight laws lack sufficient teeth and tenacity. Often deliberately.

Energy, not environmental concerns, drives the train. That's a bitter lesson for environmentalists, but it's one we better get used to here in New York.

Watching the huge rallies in Louisiana against federal attempts to put a moratorium on deep-water drilling, despite the enormous hurt the spill has caused the coast line, fishing industry and tourism, shows how much that state's economy depends on the extracted oil. Oil rules.

And it's not just Louisiana. Several administrations in Washington, of both parties, strongly encouraged the drilling, the faster the better, and in effect sanctioned the weak oversight by an understaffed federal agency, the [Minerals Management Services](#). We need the oil, we need the gas, we need energy independence, and that is just as true in New York as in Louisiana.

So like it or not, prohibiting drilling is unrealistic. Not with many billions of dollars worth of natural gas -- enough to have a significant impact on struggling local and state economies-- under our backyards in the Southern Tier.

That's simply not going to happen.

We will bring up that gas, whether it's next year, or in five years, or in 10. But it will come up.

Because it is the pot of gold, the home run, the sweet answer for desperate politicians, the temptation that cannot be resisted.

Yet 20 miles across the state line in Pennsylvania, there is plenty of evidence that nothing is for nothing, a sour testament to letting industry drive the process and what happens when a state is unprepared for consequences, like contaminated wells, and methane you can light coming out of water taps. Oh yes, there are horror stories, and more than a few.

A series of public hearings by the Environmental Protection Agency taking another hard look at hydrofracking and its consequences has brought out a perturbed citizenry. More than 1,200 showed up for a July hearing in Canonsburg, Pa., and it was raucous. A hearing scheduled for Syracuse last week, which was expected to draw even bigger numbers, was canceled because of crowd safety and security concerns. The negative effects of large-scale modern natural gas drilling most definitely have the attention of a growing number of the public.

So as much as political Albany would dearly love to let industry loose in order to turn on the money spigot, the fear of voter backlash, not to mention that niggling concern that something could go very wrong down in those wells and make our leaders look stupid, is a very healthy check and balance.

But where is a reasonable endgame here?

Taking the public pulse may be interesting, and may drive gubernatorial politics, but it doesn't really count for much. Nor does the weak-kneed legislation we've seen from our state lawmakers.

The Senate is proud of passing a bill that would put a moratorium on issuing drilling permits until next May 15. Well, please. That's nothing but symbolic.

The [Department of Environmental Conservation](#), which expected to have the permit guidelines ready to roll by the end of year, is now looking at late winter. Even if the Assembly passes the same bill, and it becomes law, the moratorium will run out just about the time permit applications could be accepted anyway. That's all window dressing.

Industry loves the idea that critics are focusing on the merits of hydrofracking, because that's a battle industry can ultimately win. It will produce a preponderance of evidence, you'll see. It's that idiotic "proven technology" ploy, which is arguing in the abstract.

What New Yorkers should be concentrating on instead is getting a hard list together of everything that's gone wrong with natural gas drilling, mostly in Pennsylvania because it is directly comparable, and forcing our state government to craft tough oversight rules to address every item on the list. Not giving us guarantees, because that's impossible, but certainly the highest level of precaution for our drinking water and our environment in general. I'm not confident we have that now.

Sure, there is an inevitability about natural gas drilling in the Marcellus shale. But the

all-important terms, those are still in our hands and unresolved.

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