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Ronald Fraser: Hydrofracking too risky without an enforcement tool

By **Ronald Fraser**

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As the end of New York's gas drilling moratorium draws near, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo should recall how 45 years ago city mayors, for the first time, stood up to powerful highway engineers. Gas drilling engineers, like the highway engineers before them, are finding that the public's trust has limits.

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, civil engineers enjoyed near autonomy in designing and building the Interstate Highway System inside cities. Since interstate right of ways would also wipe out city neighborhoods, local businessmen, neighborhood preservationists and environmentalists formed a passionate front against the highway engineers. After 1965, mayors in Baltimore, Boston, Washington, D. C., and other cities told the engineers, "Thanks, but no thanks."

The current brouhaha involves the drilling technique called hydraulic fracturing, or hydrofracking. Five million gallons of water laced with assorted hazardous chemicals, such as benzene and antifreeze, are pumped into each well under high pressure to break up shale layers and release trapped gas deep underground.

Since the drillers anticipate thousands of wells, and can recover less than 20 percent of the drilling fluid, the risk of underground water pollution is enormous. Like the highway engineers in the 1960s, gas drilling engineers are hoping their status, as technical experts, will trump legitimate public concerns.

At a recent professional engineering seminar, speakers belittled their critics and repeatedly asserted that hydrofracking is 100 percent safe and that they have everything under control.

But is everything under control? State and federal environmental laws prohibit discharging drilling chemicals into ground water at any depth. How are these laws to be enforced if neither the drillers nor the public regulators in Albany have the technical capabilities to do so? Neither can accurately track the millions of gallons of toxic fluids left underground as they migrate through rock fractures — and possibly into ground water aquifers.

The regulators can't prove the drillers are violating the laws, and the drillers can't prove they are not. What good is an unenforceable law? Imagine the state setting the speed limit on the Thruway, but neglecting to build in the means to enforce the law.

If the state issues new drilling permits without the means to investigate and enforce these laws, the state would, in effect, surrender its public defender role and give the drillers permission to go forth and pollute.

Until state regulators are technically equipped to independently verify whether or not permit holders are complying with the state's laws, Cuomo and the State Legislature should continue to protect the well being of the state's residents and natural environment. They should simply tell the gas drilling engineers, "Thanks, but no thanks."

Ronald Fraser, Ph. D., lives in the Town of Colden and is a member of the town's Environmental Planning Board.

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Is the risk of polluting of our water table worth the gas that will be taken by these wells? If you research the process you will find that everywhere it's been done there has been major environmental damage. Currently "fracking" is being done in Pennsylvania, as these problems arise municipalities like Brockway PA are in the process of passing laws to prohibit "fracking". Residents of Ridgway PA have found their spring water polluted by the drilling. Fracking on a single gas well consumes millions of gallons of water, which can be a significant burden on local water tables. As things currently stand, frackers are exempted from having to comply with the Clean Water Act. This means they can legally poison the water. By hiding behind a claim the chemicals are proprietary knowledge they are not even required to inform the public of the chemicals that they are pumping into the ground, which can include methanol, diesel, anhydrous ammonia, ethylene glycol, toluene, xylene, various other complex hydrocarbons, some of which are proven carcinogens, hydrogen sulfide (aka hydrosulfuric acid), other industrial acids, arsenic, and possibly even radioactive barium! Each well produces millions of gallons of industrial wastewater that require cleaning. Each well typically stores their fracking water in a pit near the drilling pad. If these pits overflow or leak they contaminate local water supplies and cause environmental damage. This water has been taken to wastewater treatment plants, treated and released still toxic! Each well typically leaves over a million gallons per well in the ground. That in-ground pollution has the potential to poison aquifers that provide local drinking water.

KEN MCFALL, LOCKPORT, NY on Thu Jan 27, 2011 at 04:20 PM

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