



Ashokan Reservoir, a major source of drinking water for New York City, faces potential risks from natural gas drilling in the Catskills.

Photo: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashokan_Reservoir_from_Monument_Road_8.JPG

Coumo's choice for DEC chief urges caution on hydrofracking

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By **Dave Crego**, NY Alternative Energy Examiner

Gov. Andrew Coumo's choice for Commissioner of New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation is no stranger to the controversy over hydraulic fracturing. As President of the New York based [Open Space Institute](#), Joseph Martens worked to find balance between energy policy and conservation efforts, with a particular focus on the natural gas reserves found in upstate New York. His experience with this issue is significant because the methods proposed for extracting the gas from the Marcellus Shale formation can impact a vital source of drinking water for New York City.

According to Mr. Martens, New Yorkers should be aware that natural gas extraction comes with a heavy price and urges caution before proceeding, especially in the face of industry recalcitrance about the potential risks associated with hydraulic fracturing. In a [speech](#) last year at Union College, Mr. Martens called on the DEC to place science before industry rhetoric before allowing drilling throughout the Catskills and southern tier regions.

The hazards of hydraulic fracturing lie with the chemicals used during the drilling process. In December of 2009, the NYC Department of Environmental Protection released its [impact assessment](#) of natural gas production which highlighted a number of concerns.

To begin with, the drilling process uses vast quantities of water which could exacerbate drought conditions during dry periods. The biggest challenge, however, is containing the chemicals and other harmful materials which are either injected into or removed from underground formations during the drilling

process. When chemical and sand-laced fluids are pumped into the ground they cause miniature explosions as the shale is fractured. This procedure releases methane, which contains the natural gas, as well as carcinogens, radioactive material, and other toxins which can contaminate subsurface and ground water. Once released, the contaminated water seeps into streams and reservoirs, posing a risk to both wildlife and humans who rely on it as a drinking source. There also exists anecdotal evidence of methane contaminating drinking water, causing flare-ups from household taps.

While this type of drilling is often conducted with little or no environmental impact, there are no guarantees that the industrial-strength waste water will not exceed existing treatment capabilities. This is the danger posed to New Yorkers. Certain companies have already announced they will not drill within the city's watershed, but residents need to be aware of the risks nonetheless.

If confirmed, Mr. Martens will bring a great deal of experience and credibility to this issue, and seems poised to augment the DEC's commendable track record over the last few decades. New York City has committed a great deal of time and money to ensure an unfiltered supply of drinking water, and deserves a DEC commissioner willing to do no less. In light of Mr. Martens' own track record, the Governor seems to have made a wise choice.

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