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Educational, environmental & economic institutions get together on natural gas

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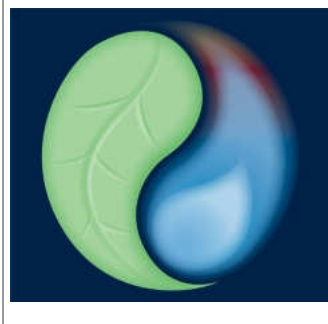
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An abundance of a natural resource can be a curse as well as a blessing. Northeast Pennsylvania has experienced this dilemma before.

From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s this region supplied a great deal of the anthracite coal that helped fuel America's growing energy needs. The money generated by coal mining made some people very wealthy, provided jobs for many others, and helped fund municipal infrastructures to serve swelling populations up and down the valley.

Evidence of those boom times can be seen today in some of the magnificent structures from the period that are still in use, such as the Scranton Cultural Center at The Masonic Temple, or the Radisson at Lackawanna Station hotel.

The not-so-good old days

Of course, not all of the legacies of those flush times are positive. Mine subsidences still occasionally swallow sections of roads or homes. The Old Forge bore hole discharges up to 50 million gallons of contaminated mine water into the Lackawanna River every day, turning the river and rocks there orange. Many people were injured, sickened or killed extracting the coal from the earth. Taxpayers have spent millions of dollars over the years to remediate the damage caused by mining, and there's still much work to be done.

The emergence of technology enabling the extraction of natural gas from the Marcellus Shale formation underlying much of the state presents residents

with opportunities and problems similar to mining.

The gas deposits are said to be among the biggest in the world. Once again this region will help fuel America's growing energy needs. Only this time, instead of carbon-belching coal, we can provide relatively clean-burning natural gas. The money generated by the gas industry will make some people very wealthy, provide jobs for many others, and help fund municipal infrastructures around the state.

Of course, not all of the news from the gas boom is positive. Massive amounts of water mixed with potentially dangerous chemicals are injected into the ground in order to extract the gas. The potential for contaminating water supplies is very real. Roads are being devastated by heavy truck traffic in areas where drilling is being done. Drill pads, access roads and pipelines all have an environmental impact in the areas where they are built.

In order to help residents make sense of it all, The Institute for Energy and Environmental Research for Northeastern Pennsylvania (now there's a name that can only be the result of a government grant) has put up a website it describes as a "Marcellus shale information clearinghouse." The site, located at energy.wilkes.edu, is the result of the combined efforts of Wilkes University, King's College, The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development, and Earth Conservancy.

Off to a good start

The organization's goal is to help shape public policy on energy issues using the best available scientific and economic research. The group is neither pro- nor anti-gas extraction. It hopes to foster sustainable, environmentally and economically sound decisions on energy extraction and usage.

The website, which is supported by funding from the U.S. Department of Energy, is not complete, but there is already a lot of good information on it.

The home page has tabs leading to sections on:

- Marcellus Basics - geology, drilling, distribution, water use and more
- Issues - ecological impacts, regulations, taxes and more
- Library - peer-reviewed articles, technical reports, media reports and more
- Law/Policies - a look at federal, state and local laws
- Economics - the financial impact on developers, land owners, local communities, the state and nation
- Public Opinion - the results and analysis of public opinion surveys
- Education/Training - descriptions and links to educational and training opportunities
- Employment - links to job listings in the industry



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The sections that aren't finished yet have descriptions of the type of information and resources they eventually will contain.

There are also links on the home page to recent articles regarding shale developments, and a schedule of upcoming public events addressing the issue.

The site is visually well designed and organized in a way that makes it easy to find your way around. The navigation is simple and intuitive, but it appears to have a few minor bugs that still need to be worked out.

If the website lives up to its goals it will be a valuable tool for people who will be impacted by gas development, which is virtually everyone in the state. The methodology of the site, which is basing decisions on a review of the best available information, makes good sense. The people running the organization are local and should have a vested interest in making the right choices.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.

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