

Gas issue is money, only money

Fred LeBrun Commentary

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Tapping into the King Midas riches embedded in New York's share of the Marcellus Shale will be front and center in the political arena before long. I'm afraid there's just too much money at stake for politicians to leave it alone.

At which time World War III will break out over whether we should say yes or no to using horizontal hydrofracking to drill for gas, and on what terms.

There is no middle ground. You're either for it or against it, although my inclination is to try to find accommodation. The problem is, the issue is money, and only money. Lots of it.

It is not about saving the natural world with cleaner energy. Emerging research is refuting that notion. Nor is the argument about decreasing dependence on foreign oil. We easily could let other states that also sit on Marcellus Shale deposits extract enough for this nation for the next 50 years.

No, it's about money, and making money, and who will benefit and who will not. It is about the costs, known and feared, associated with the benefit, because nothing's for nothing. And the stickiest part of all is that it pits those few who stand to make a lot of money against the many who will bear the brunt of the cost. And what are the costs?

If I had to make a decision right now on this, the most important environmental and public policy issue facing this generation of New Yorkers, I'd do exactly what the state is doing. That is, nothing. I'd wait. Beyond the end of the state moratorium on drilling in June and into next year. Too much is at stake.

Last week, Bob Perciasepe, deputy administrator of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, told U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer's environment committee that initial results of an independent, peer-reviewed study "to understand the relationship between hydraulic fracturing and drinking water" should be publicly available by late 2012. That is guidance critical to establishing true costs.

Predictably, the gas extraction industry will claim that is just another needless delay. Well, frankly, the industry has brought this on itself, notably by what happened in Pennsylvania. Nor is the gas going anywhere in the meantime.

Boxer's committee was explicitly looking into "Natural Gas Drilling: Public Health and Environment Impacts," indicative of how ignorant we all are of the consequences. Boxer



referenced an eyepopping series of stories that ran in The New York Times in February on how Pennsylvania has suffered from sloppy state and federal regulation of hydraulic hydrofracking and the state's own greed. It seems the industry mantra that there are no documented cases anywhere of drinking water contamination because of hydraulic fracturing may be true only if you consider just the narrow physical process. The billions of gallons of highly contaminated water laced with chemicals needed for the process, and the briny, radioactive wastewater still laced with the chemicals that comes back up are a different matter.

While the industry may have made great strides in engineering to get at gas a mile or more below the surface, the technology lags considerably for confidently processing that wastewater. Sort of like the nuclear waste problem associated with another energy source.

Probably the most damning testimony before Boxer's committee came from Conrad Volz of the University of Pittsburgh's graduate school of public health. He said that much of this toxic wastewater in Pennsylvania was being processed in municipal sewage treatment plants not designed for it. When it comes out of those plants, the wastewater is still highly contaminated, he said, and winds up in streams and rivers that become water supplies. The long-term potential damage to the environment and human health is staggering.

No, I am not anti-drilling, just a cautious citizen. The industry can give us all sorts of assurances, but what's happening one state away with the same industry players using the same technology in the same Marcellus Shale tells a different tale. Until those stories are the same, we should be skeptical and issue no permits.

We have more than a friend in Pennsylvania, we have a guinea pig. Let's be taught by example.

So what is a reasonable expectation for New York? Ultimately, I do believe there can be accommodation. Some drilling, tightly controlled and limited. None whatsoever in the Catskill watershed and a wide buffer zone around it, for example, because there is too great a risk for New York City's water supply. None on state lands, so that in the future people can glimpse the golden age, when the horizon wasn't dotted with wells.

Conrad Volz testified that in his view, these highly industrialized drilling operations should not be sited in areas of high population density, or near schools or critical infrastructure. A catastrophic blowout, with ensuing explosions and fires, is a risk. Ah, yes, that old tussle between risk and benefit. It comes back to bite us again.

And before any well starts pumping, a wastewater treatment plant has to be up and running in New York, with sufficient numbers of inspectors in the field. No plant, no deal. That we've already learned, and I'm sure there's more.

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