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Go Slowly: Pennsylvania's experience calls for cautious approach to hydrofracking in New York

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Developments in Dimock, Pa. — Ground Zero of the hydrofracking debate — make a strong case for New York to proceed cautiously on allowing the controversial drilling technique here.

Pennsylvania's top environmental regulator recently announced plans to sue Houston-based Cabot Oil & Gas Corporation unless it agrees to pay \$11.8 million to extend a public water line to at least 18 residents whose water wells have been contaminated with methane gas.

Cabot argues "overwhelming scientific and historical proof that proves we were not the source of this methane migration." Company officials further claim that it was "under duress" that they signed consent orders that accepted responsibility for the contamination.

The dispute is escalating beyond words. There are reports of Dimock residents greeting Cabot well-testers with guns; one resident recently was charged with disorderly conduct in such an incident. Cabot, meanwhile, has hired armed guards to accompany employees onto residential properties.

The dispute in Dimock gets to the heart of the debate over the safety of the drilling process that involves injecting millions of gallons of chemical-laced water at high pressure to crack shale rock and release natural gas.

Opponents fiercely advocate for protecting the state's precious watersheds. Environmental groups also point to studies that show chemicals used in hydrofracking can cause cancer and drilling sites on farms have resulted in stillbirths, low fertility and no milk production in livestock.

The drilling companies counter that these are hysteria-driven exaggerations, and say no causal link has been found between their drilling and purported negative incidents. They say the process is safe.

Further, supporters point to the potential economic impact of drilling — including possible revenue for cash-strapped New York and much needed jobs. There's also the attractive allure of hydrofracking to release gas that will make the United States more self-sufficient in energy production.

New York is right not to rush into hydrofracking. The DEC has prohibited new drilling in New York until an environmental review is complete, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently completed hearings that will influence a study of the health and environmental effects of hydrofracking.

The state Senate has voted for a temporary moratorium on hydrofracking, and we hope the Assembly will follow suit.

Incidents in Pennsylvania set a troubling precedent and underscore the need for careful study and strict oversight. In the meantime, let's slow down and lower the high-pitched debate a few notches before someone gets hurt.

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