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Hanger defied stereotypes

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It's hugely ironic that John Hanger, the state regulator in the infancy of the Marcellus shale industry, came into office in 2008 portrayed as a wild-eyed environmentalist and he leaves office in a little more than a week painted in some quarters as a stooge of industry.

Hanger is neither.

"The problem is I'm a raging centrist," he said in an interview. "I approach issues based on the facts."

Hanger, 53, spent the last two years as secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection. Gov. Ed Rendell raised eyebrows and some concern in the business community when he appointed Hanger to the post while Hanger was serving as the head of PennFuture, an environmental advocacy group.

But Hanger was portrayed as an anti-drilling villain in the documentary "Gasland," which received national attention. He took a huge hit last week -- by implication -- in an Associated Press story that made Pennsylvania's regulation of natural gas drilling look like that of a Third-World nation.

Pennsylvania was the only state that allowed discharges of partially treated water into rivers, the AP story said. The fact that Pennsylvania put new regulations into place last year that requires water running by water treatment plants to meet tough standards was largely ignored, Hanger believes. It was allowed in the past on the argument that it's diluted in the mass of water flowing through rivers.

It wasn't until the eighth paragraph that you found out, "State officials, energy companies and the operators of treatment plants insist that with the right safeguards in place, the practice poses little or no risk to the environment or to the hundreds of thousands of people who rely on those rivers for drinking water."

Today, about 70 percent of hydraulic wastewater is recycled in part due to the tougher standards, Hanger said.

You can take this to the bank. If past practice posed the slightest risk, Hanger would have been screaming about it.

"As of today," Hanger said last week, "every single drop of tap water from public

water supplies is safe." He said he knows this because of rigorous, daily testing done by state regulators.

"I'm not going to say there's no threat ever," said Hanger.

Here's another thing you can bank on. It's a good thing for Republican Gov.-elect Tom Corbett that AP chose to run this investigative story last week and not after his inauguration Jan. 18. Even though Corbett would have had nothing to do with past policies, it would have fit with perceived notions among some that Republicans want nothing better than to let the shale industry run wild.

But what took place -- unfair as the presentation was -- happened under a Democrat governor's environmental stewardship.

Hanger, an attorney and former state Public Utility Commission member appointed by the late Gov. Robert P. Casey, has been an outspoken proponent of taxing the extraction of natural gas to fund environmental protection and to help pay for vital state services. Hanger differs sharply with Corbett's no-tax approach to the industry.

But Hanger was "heartened" by Corbett's recent remarks in the Trib that when it comes to regulation of the shale industry, the career prosecutor views himself as a "cop." Corbett said in effect, let the chips fall where they may. The regulations will be enforced.

"Those are the right words," Hanger said. "The real test is action."

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