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Opinion

EDITORIAL: The hydrofracking debate

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A new energy rush is on and its lapping at our doorstep in the Catskills. Natural gas embedded deep underground beneath Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia and Ohio is said to be enough to supply the East Coast for up to 50 years.

To the extent it offers a domestic alternative to being held hostage to foreign oil, extracting natural gas from the huge Marcellus Shale formation seems a good tradeoff.

To the extent it offers an alternative to burning inherently dirtier coal, natural gas seems a good tradeoff.

But these apparent tradeoffs cannot be verified until the actual, full cost of developing that natural gas has been assessed. That includes the potential environmental costs, which have not been fairly, fully and openly evaluated.

The potential dangers of the modern hydrofracking and horizontal drilling techniques used to extract the gas are incompletely understood because they have not been adequately studied.

But the anecdotal evidence from where hydrofracking is proceeding apace, however, is not reassuring.

THE Associated Press has reported that Texas regulators have been testing air in gas-drilling fields out of fear of cancer-causing benzene and that "numerous residents" in Colorado say gas drilling has contaminated their water wells.

Against that background, it would be unwise to disregard the potential effect on human health and groundwater of a more or less system-wide assault on the Marcellus Shale formation for the next 50 years.

A full-scale energy rush could result in the deep puncturing of over 50,000 square miles in 30,000 locations, each to be pumped full of some 4 million gallons of water, chemicals and sand.

In the Gulf of Mexico, the world has just seen what happens when a single well is the site of a catastrophic engineering failure, which happened despite the reassurances of the industry that caused that disaster.

Gas drilling is subject to the same sort of greed-driven miscalculation of risk, even as the industry attempts to soothingly reassure everyone that hydrofracking is benign and time-tested.

A well blew out in north central Pennsylvania last month and it took 16 hours to be brought under control, all the while disgorging natural gas and fracking water. It will come as little surprise to anyone who has paid attention to the precautionary lapses on the Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf to learn the driller had taken shortcuts and failed to install a proper blowout prevention system.

THERE is afoot an effort to get the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to reconsider its 2005 exemption of hydrofracking from federal regulation, an exemption known as the "Halliburton loophole," after the energy company. It is perhaps no coincidence that the exemption was granted while former Halliburton chief executive Dick Cheney was vice president of the

United States and led the shaping of the administration's energy policy, largely behind closed doors with energy industry officials.

Standing in the way of an honest reassessment of hydrofracking are the sheer economic wherewithal of the industry and the continued reliance of our political system on campaign money.

It is to say, to put it bluntly, that the industry may be expected less to rely on the science and track record it claims proves its case, than on simply buying its way to a favorable political outcome.

In the first six months of the year alone, the industry has spent over \$1 million lobbying Albany.

That's an old movie in the region of the Marcellus Shale. Standard Oil, the forerunner to ExxonMobil, was so powerful and corrupting a political influence in late 19th-century Pennsylvania that journalist Henry Lloyd Demarest famously remarked that "The Standard Oil has done everything with the Pennsylvania legislature except to refine it."

THERE is little chance that our state Legislature will be refined, but, alas, there always seems room for more corruption of otherwise sound policy.

The prudent way to develop sound policy is to allow adequate study to make a reasoned judgment based on science, rather than the depth of the industry's pockets.

The Legislature, all of whose members face November elections, should allow the state Department of Environmental Conservation adequate time to study the issue.

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