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SPECIAL REPORT: In Depth On Fracking

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Written by Michael Wooten

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TOWANDA, Penn. -- Northern Pennsylvania looks a lot like the Southern Tier of New York, with beautiful landscapes, fruitful farmland and rolling hills; but it's what's beneath the surface that's fueling debate. The natural gas-rich Marcellus Shale extends through the Keystone State and into New York.

The shale is believed to hold trillions of cubic feet of natural gas -- enough to supply the Northeast for decades.

Natural gas burns much cleaner than coal and other fossil fuels, and it could one day fuel cars at half the price of gasoline, but the difficulty has been getting the gas out of the ground. That's where hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, comes in.

Traditional vertical fracking has been around for decades; but in recent years, engineers came up with horizontal fracturing, which allows them to retrieve more gas, more quickly. After the drill makes it several thousand feet deep, it turns, eventually

producing a horizontal well.

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SPECIAL REPORT: In Depth On Fracking |... Chesapeake Energy's Maribeth Anderson met with 2 On Your Side at a drill rig in Towanda, Penn.

"Horizontal drilling is the economic way to capture the resource," Anderson said. "The thickness of the shale is such that we have to be able to turn that drill bit this way in order to hit the payzone, in order to get the gas... We need to effectively capture the resource, and horizontal drilling is the way to do it."

Horizontal fracturing is more controversial, because it requires enormous quantities of water, sand and chemicals. They are injected into the well under enormous pressure to fracture the shale, releasing the natural gas. It's a process that comes with controversy.

"There are very good questions," Anderson said. "And we know that we have very good answers to those questions."

A common question from skeptics is how to protect underground water sources.

"What type of danger is there to something happening underground and disturbing our water supplies?" 2 On Your Side's Michael Wooten asked.

"Hydraulic fracturing has gotten a lot of attention," Anderson replied. "But it's important, I think, to remember that there's never been a case of hydraulic fracturing chemicals getting into the ground water. It's never happened."

But there have been accidents.

In the small town of Dimock, Penn., the water is so mixed with methane that residents can set it on fire. The state says the contamination was caused by the vertical natural gas drilling in the area. Residents have been forced to drink water that's treated in their basements, trucked in from out of town or bottled.

Recently, Cabot Oil and Gas, which operated the drill in Dimock, settled with the state and agreed to pay \$4.1 million to neighbors affected by the drilling accident. Many are still suing the company, which has not admitted liability.

"A company does not pay \$4.1 million to 19 individuals that it did not harm," Activist Albert Brown said.

Brown is part of a group called Frack Action Buffalo, which has lobbied against expanded natural gas drilling in Western New York. He says horizontal drilling -- which is currently prohibited in New York due to an executive order placing a temporary moratorium until July 1 -- would cause bigger problems in this area due to the local geology.

"The gas in the shale (near Buffalo) is very shallow," Brown said. "Many wells in this area are 900 feet, 1500 feet."

Brown contrasted that with the wells in West Virginia and Pennsylvania, which can be as deep as 9,000 feet. He said the more shallow oil in Western New York increases the risk of water



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contamination.

"The shale around here is also extremely erodable, highly fractured already," Brown said.

Independent experts agreed that portions of the shale in Western New York are much more shallow than in Pennsylvania and West Virginia; however, Anderson is adamant that horizontal fracking would only take place in areas where the shale is several thousand feet below water aquifers.

"There's no way for (the chemicals) to permeate the rock?" Wooten asked.

"Not a mile of that rock, no," Anderson responded. "It's kind of like saying, 'you stand on that side of the mountain. I'll stand on this side of the mountain, and I'll point a water hose at you, and you tell me when you get wet.'"

Chesapeake Energy points out that workers install several layers of "protection" around the well to keep the water, sand, chemicals and natural gas from escaping into the ground and possibly the water. Those layers include cement, steel and casing.

Environmentalists say the concerns aren't limited underground. Talisman Energy was recently fined for a surface spill in Pennsylvania. Diesel leaked off the drill pad, contaminating at least 3800 tons of soil and 132,000 gallons of water, according to Penn. state officials.

Another concern is what to do with the "produced water", or the fluid that comes out of the well after it's been fracked.

Most companies stored the fluid in so-called "frack pits", leading to overflow concerns and other hazards to wildlife and humans nearby. The fluid would eventually be treated and then released back into streams and lakes.

A 2 On Your Side investigation found "fracking fluid" made its way to the Buffalo Sewer Authority. Documents from U.S. Energy show the BSA treated the liquid; however, a New York State Department of Environmental Conservation spokesperson said the fluid was pre-treated, according to regulations set forth by the federal EPA.

Still, it concerns anti-fracking activists and prompted members of Buffalo's Common Council to pass a ban on fracking and the "storage, transfer, treatment and/or disposal" of fracking waste.

"This vote is an historical event that shines the light on the harms of fracking and will open the eyes of many New Yorkers," said Rita Yelda, organizer for Frack Action Buffalo.

Yelda and other activists praised the Common Council's vote, which was unanimous.

"This ban will protect the health, well-being, and safety of Buffalo's residents, as well as protecting the city from environmental and infrastructure consequences," Yelda said.

The city council in Pittsburgh, which previously passed a fracking ban, sent a video message congratulating Buffalo's council and its residents.

Although the Buffalo ban is largely symbolic, because the shale barely enters the city limits, activists hope it will influence the politics in Albany.

In mid to late summer, Governor Andrew Cuomo will decide whether to extend the current moratorium of high-volume, horizontal fracking, or allow the controversial practice.

His opponent in November's election, Buffalo developer Carl Paladino, hopes for the later.

"Lets be rational," Paladino said. "Lets balance risk with economic impact. Lets look at those things."

Paladino said experts told him during the campaign that allowing horizontal fracking in New York could provide up to 25,000 jobs paying an average salary of \$50,000, in addition to the royalties, taxes and other economic benefits.

"Drill it and put people to work," Paladino said. "Stop this economic foolishness and scaring people unnecessarily."

Some experts are split on the economic impact of hydraulic fracturing. Chesapeake said it's allowed them to hire 1,000 workers in Pennsylvania, in addition to the many vendors and spin-off jobs created by the industry. Opponents say the drilling jobs are often temporary and nomadic, and the spin-off positions are in the lower-paid industries of hospitality, administrative work and transportation.

Several academics are currently studying the economic impact of Marcellus drilling, including Dr. Susan Christopherson, who gave 2 On Your Side preliminary results of her research, which is still in progress:

What we need to look at is how to use the asset of natural gas to create or attract other industries, particularly in manufacturing, and to decrease the cost of energy for our existing businesses and for our communities through, for example, energy districts that can also use renewable energy sources. We want to understand if its possible to build and maintain diversified economies around natural gas extraction.

If we don't have a proactive policy, all we will get is the boom jobs and a few hundred well monitoring jobs that will be local and last after the drillers leave. At the same time we may have harmed our tourism and agriculture industries.

For now, any economic impact in New York State is purely speculative, due to the moratorium. Anderson said Chesapeake has no plans now for drilling in New York; however, that would quickly change if the moratorium is lifted.

2 On Your Side reached out to Governor Cuomo's office but did not receive a response. He has indicated in the past that he only supports expanded natural gas drilling if it can be proven safe, and he is waiting on a report from the DEC ahead of the July 1 deadline.

Web Extra:

EPA's Web Site Regarding Fracking: