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A glut of trucks and equipment are needed to accomplish drilling for Marcellus Shale gas.

Jerry Zremski / Buffalo News

# Jobs at stake as state mulls gas drilling

By **David Robinson**

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Julie Roy lives within eyeshot of a half-dozen natural gas wells in northwestern Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale region.

Roy, a civil engineer with years of experience in the energy industry, isn't a critic of Marcellus drilling. But she also knows firsthand some of the issues that come with the drilling boom in rural Pennsylvania as energy companies rush to tap into vast supplies of natural gas trapped in rocks more than a mile below the surface.

One of the first things you notice, she says, is the traffic. Dozens and dozens of trucks hauling water and construction equipment to and from drill sites. There's the construction activity, from building well pads to the pipelines that are needed to bring the gas from the wellhead to customers.

Then there's the noise, from the trucks, from the compressors pumping the gas, from the equipment building the retention ponds that hold the millions of gallons of chemically treated water used to free the gas trapped in the Marcellus's lucrative layer of black shale.

That water is perhaps the biggest issue of all. It's mixed with sand and other chemicals to kill bacteria, prevent scale from building up on pipes. Drillers add soapy chemicals to reduce friction and help the water flow freely.

How to safely reuse that tainted water, treat it and prevent accidents that could contaminate ground water supplies that lie between the surface and the layer of Marcellus rocks is a sticking point that has New York officials taking a slow approach to drilling, while Pennsylvania officials plow full speed ahead.

But as the Gulf of Mexico oil spill proved, all it takes is one mistake to cause an accident of epic environmental proportions.

"New York is a little bit nervous about making some of those final decisions," says Roy, who spoke earlier this month at a conference sponsored by the University at Buffalo on the opportunities within the Marcellus Shale.

That go-slow approach frustrates S. Dennis Holbrook, the executive vice president at Norse Energy Corp. in Hamburg. Norse has leases on 130,000 acres of land in Central New York that lie above what experts believe is a gas-rich section of the Marcellus.

The company has added 50 jobs at its offices in Hamburg and Norwich, N. Y., over the last two years, and Holbrook thinks that number could easily double if New York

officials give the OK to start horizontal drilling in the Marcellus.

“It’s a tremendous opportunity to stimulate job growth in New York State,” he says, citing an industry-backed study that estimated Marcellus drilling pumped almost \$4 billion and 44,000 jobs into the Pennsylvania economy last year.

To Holbrook and other gas industry officials, drilling in the Marcellus can be done safely, without undue risk of contaminating water supplies. Most of the Marcellus drilling in New York would be in portions of the Southern Tier west of Broome County.

“The opportunities are out there if we could just get out of our own way,” says Daniel Spitzer, a Buffalo energy attorney. “We’ve already lost a lot of time here in New York. We might as well ship all of these jobs to Pennsylvania.”

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