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Fracking in New York's Marcellus Shale; An Open Forum

This week I had the opportunity to moderate and co-produce a panel with Paul McGinniss, writer and green advocate and the SUNY New Paltz Environmental Task Force at SUNY New Paltz, "The Future of Gas Drilling in New York State," primarily focusing on the process of hydraulic fracturing in the Marcellus Shale formation, including parts that lay in the New York City watershed. Hydraulic fracturing, also known as "fracking," uses massive amounts of water and chemicals to access oil and gas trapped in hard-to-reach shale formations. The EPA has urged state regulators to further study the environmental impact of such techniques primarily because the federal government has no oversight in this matter.

The panelists included James Gennaro, chairman of the New York City Council Environmental Protection Committee, Kate Sinding, senior attorney for Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Scott Rotruck, vice president of corporate development for Chesapeake Energy, Stuart Gruskin, executive deputy commissioner, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), and Wes Gillingham, program director, Catskill Mountain Keeper. There was also a closing keynote by U.S. Congressman Maurice Hinchey, D-New York 22nd District.

Attended by over two hundred people, the session was well received by a well-informed and impassioned audience. The conversation between the panelists was sophisticated, with an incredible amount of information proffered. The issues inherent in this particular situation are quite complicated. First, natural gas trapped in the Marcellus Shale, according to Congressman Hinchey, can satisfy the entire nation's current energy needs for the next twenty-five years. However, based on current science, he is firmly against any drilling that utilizes fracking. He is not opposed to the use of natural gas; he is opposed to this particular method of obtaining it.

The questions from the audience were mostly polite. Of course, in this type of forum, there is always the tendency to field unusual perspectives, including a well-meaning person who thought it would be better to import natural gas from Russia. And there was the obligatory person with the impulse to say "Halliburton" over and over until the word had no more meaning than "banana." In general, the knowledge base of the attendees was gratifying in that people took the time to get the facts and asked pertinent questions such as what will happen to tourism, a main economic driver, if drilling begins to color the landscape.

Most of the issues relate to four areas: Environmental/Health; Economic; Energy; and National Security. Councilman Gennaro opposes any drilling in any part of the New York City watershed whatsoever. Chesapeake Energy contends that it will not drill in any part of the watershed that it has under lease. This issue is so hotly contested because it really cuts to the bone. The facts are clear. We have energy needs and we are not doing anything in real terms to reduce them. The U.S. utility industry produces 3.7 trillion kilowatt hours of energy per year and we can no longer continue to be a nation that garners 50% of our energy from burning coal. Although alternative energy and renewable sources are gaining momentum, it will take at least another two or three decades before they assume a significant share of energy production.

In reality, hydraulic fracturing in the Marcellus Shale has quite a long way to go before it can begin. Last September, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation issues the Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement on the Oil, Gas and Solution Mining Regulatory Program that is still under review. Stuart Gruskin, executive deputy commissioner, indicated that there are over 14,000 comments to review while processing the statement and that's not going to happen overnight.

The good news is that this process is going under extensive review and gaining more and more oversight from both the federal and state levels. As Congressman Hinchey said, the amount of natural gas can't be overlooked. It's how we get to the gas that makes all the difference. As long as these discussions still happen, perhaps the proper balance and solutions can be found.

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