

Making a mess is a local issue

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Wouldn't it be amazing if two small towns along the Delaware managed to bring the massive effort to drill for gas in the Marcellus Shale to a halt not by arguing about science or politics but by insisting on their rights to exercise the most basic form of local control?

That is one of the strategies being discussed in Lumberland and Highland, an approach that the gas drilling industry might have to start taking seriously because it cuts through and under most of what has up to now been a stalemate of lobbyists and conflicting interests.

Towns probably cannot — and should not — regulate something as complicated as drilling. They do not have the expertise. And they should not — and most likely cannot — be able to install zoning regulations that seem to be about density or other legitimate concerns but are really a roundabout route to control an activity the townspeople cannot get at in any other way.

But there is a long-standing sentiment that people can keep others from making a mess, from destroying the woods, fields and trees that so many other local and state regulations are in place to protect. And nothing leaves a scar on the landscape like hundreds of large trucks and rigs searching for places to drill.

You don't even have to be opposed to the technique of hydraulic fracturing that the companies plan to use, don't have to be suspicious about an industry that poured diesel fuel down the wells and said it did no harm, don't have to note that most of those in favor of this activity stand to make a lot of money whether they live in the community or not.

Anybody who has seen photos of the drilling sites in Pennsylvania knows that it will be very hard for companies to extract the gas without having an adverse impact on surrounding land and access routes. At the very least, a community should have the right to keep that harm to a minimum, something that would make drillers recalculate the true costs of moving in and taking gas out.

And if nothing else, this approach should buy some time so that the studies that need to be done are completed and we have a better understanding of just how safe all of this can, should and must be.