

## No hydrofracking for now

By STEVE BREYMAN

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Natural gas has been hiding in New York's share of the Marcellus shale -- anywhere from 1,000 feet to about a mile and a half into the ground -- for several hundred million years. It will be there five, 10, 50 years from now. There's no cost crisis. Natural gas for a residential customer in New York currently retails for \$16 per thousand cubic feet (19th most expensive in the country), and the wholesale price has been dropping steadily. Forecasts for the near future do not indicate any pending price surges.

Natural gas drilling has a hundred-plus year history in New York. More than 75,000 wells have been drilled since the late 19th century, with more than 13,000 still active. Forty-five billion cubic feet of gas were produced in New York last year, worth several hundred million dollars.

So why all the excitement over gas drilling in the Marcellus shale?

In a word, hydrofracking, the controversial technique whereby, for each well, drillers blast a million or more gallons of high pressure water, sand and chemicals to force gas out of rock. The industry claims the process is environmentally safe, creates jobs and generates tax revenues.

But that's what it said about deep water oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

Opponents worry about dangers posed to water quality, and cite fracking problems across the country's shale formations. Conflicting claims fly over an alleged loophole -- engineered by Dick Cheney for Halliburton -- exempting the process from the requirements of the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Many Pennsylvanians unconnected to the gas industry now regret their state's gas rush. Common sense dictates New Yorkers deliberate thoughtfully before permitting fracking. The EPA is in the midst of its second study of hydrofracking (the first in 2004 was embarrassingly pro-drilling, even by Bush administration standards). The state Department of Environmental Conservation is cataloging comments received on its draft supplemental generic environmental impact statement on the technique.

But regardless of the studies' results, if hydrofracking is the only means by which to get the gas to flow, that same common sense should have us leave it in the ground for the foreseeable future, perhaps forever.

Pass up a once-in-a-lifetime chance to play Qatar for a few years? Yes. Although it's twice as clean as coal when burned, natural gas still contributes mightily to climate change.



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Hurrying to exploit Marcellus shale gas will not enhance energy security as claimed by the industry. The opposite is true. Energy security is burning other countries' gas while leaving ours in the ground for possible future use, while moving swiftly at the same time toward renewables.

The fact that natural gas is a fossil fuel, nonrenewable by definition, ensures that the price will rise over time. As we go over the inevitable hump of peak gas -- that point where half of all available natural gas has been pumped -- the price will rise ever more rapidly, and stay high. Leaving gas recoverable only by hydrofracking in the ground is like money in the bank, with interest.

Because it worsens climate change, natural gas can only be a transitional fuel anyway. We'll have to find other means by which to heat our homes and cook our meals. The sooner, the better. Happily, solar thermal and heat pump (geothermal) technologies are already proven alternatives for heating.

Perhaps we will genuinely need Marcellus gas some day, and the only way to get it is hydrofracking. Peak gas arrives earlier than predicted, and the price skyrockets. The green transition not yet complete. That day may come, but it's not on the horizon.

The longer we wait, the more likely new, safer technologies for hard to recover gas will permit us to bypass it. Compressed air or some other benign alternative may one day replace the huge water consumption and toxic chemical use currently essential to fracking.

Waiting to develop the Marcellus shale with safer technology will also virtually guarantee increased royalties for landowners with leases, profits for gas companies, and tax revenues for governments. That's because it's a sure bet prices will rise sharply sooner than we're ready for. Avoiding fracking also saves water supplies, protects water quality, and hedges against the certainties of an uncertain future.

If hydrofracking is the only option for Marcellus gas, the wisest course is to wait, baby, wait.

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