



Our view: Education key in debate over hydrofracking

AT ISSUE: Pros, cons must be carefully weighed before making final decision

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The dramatic impact that hydraulic fracturing could have in Central New York and across the state — good or bad — cannot be understated. For that reason, the issue must be carefully examined and given a full public vetting before any decision is made on how — or whether — to proceed.

A bad decision could be detrimental to the physical and/or economic health of New York state. That's why:

* State officials need to scrutinize the process and require companies to provide complete information on the operation, potential glitches and plans for dealing with emergencies.

* Information on hydrofracking and potential risks must be made available to the public before any drilling is allowed. A 30-day public commentary period is required. People should do their own research, too, so they can form opinions. Much information is available online. A controversial documentary, "Gasland," explores this topic as well and has been screened locally a few times recently.

* If drilling eventually is allowed, it needs to be done under strict state permitting process and with the approval of local municipalities. A bill co-sponsored by state Sen. James Seward, R-Milford, would give local governments veto power through zoning to choose whether they want to allow hydrofracking.

Hydraulic fracturing — hydrofracking — uses a horizontal drilling technique to extract natural gas from the rock formations, such as the Marcellus Shale, which is deep beneath the surface and extends into southern Oneida County. Supporters say drilling vertical wells to access the gas has been done for more than 60 years across the state, but drilling horizontally from those vertical wells is more controversial.

Opponents say the shale contains trace levels of uranium, and their key concern is that the concentration of this uranium at the surface, on drilling equipment, and in combination with drilling muds, fracking fluid and other elements exposed in the drilling process can lead to contamination. Until an infrastructure is in place to deal with toxic byproducts, they argue, the environment — and public health — are at risk.

Last December, then-Gov. David Paterson placed a moratorium on drilling until July 1. He set June 1 as a date for the DEC to complete a supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement, but it won't be done by then. Last week, a state Assembly committee developed legislation to extend that moratorium until June 1, 2012.

There are solid hydrofracking arguments on both ends of the drill.

On the plus side is the economic value. It could be a catalyst for economic growth — jobs, trucking, restaurant and hotel business, increased tax revenue and higher home sales and other community investment.

The potential downside might be a compromising of the environment through water contamination. Recent accidents strengthen that argument. Late last month, for instance, an equipment failure at a drilling site in Bradford County, Pa., sent hydrofracking fluid spewing across a pasture and into a nearby pond, tributary and creek. Such incidents are claimed to be rare, but this was the third hydrofracking-related blowout in Pennsylvania since last June.

One ominous cloud: Researchers at Duke University recently found high levels of methane in well water collected near shale-gas drilling and hydrofracking sites in water samples taken from wells across five counties in northeastern Pennsylvania and New York. Water wells farther from the gas wells contained lower levels of methane. Methane, a flammable gas, poses a risk of explosion and in high concentrations can cause asphyxiation. It's not regulated as a contaminant in public water systems and little research has been done on its health effects in drinking water.

Clearly, this needs further study. We definitely need to develop alternate sources of energy, and whether that's drilling for natural gas, nuclear power, water-generated electricity, wind power or some other effort, it's likely to come with a certain amount of risk. The challenge before us is to determine what those risks are and how to best deal with them.

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