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## Pa. farmer: Natural gas drilling 'a nightmare'

By **Derrick Ek**

**Corning Leader**

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Elmira, N.Y. — Ron Gulla, a farmer from Hickory, Pa., says he had no idea what he was getting into when he leased his land for gas drilling.

"When I saw what was happening on my property, I couldn't believe it," Gulla said. "They totally misinformed us and misrepresented the lease."

Over the past few years, he saw his farm — in a rural area just south of Pittsburgh — become a large industrial site over which he had no control, and had his water supply tainted by high levels of toxic chemicals, he said.

Gulla — who also sells construction and forestry equipment and once spent six years working in the oil and gas industry — tried to take out a mortgage loan to finance a lawsuit against the well operator, Range Resources, but was told by the bank that his land was basically worthless because of the drilling activity there.

Gulla told gutwrenching stories of other farmers in Washington County whose property was virtually ruined by drilling. Many of their calves have been born with strange deformities, he said. Cows and horses — even dogs — have been sickened or killed from drinking the water from streams and ponds near the well pads. Folks living near compressor stations have had serious health issues from air pollution, he added.

The farmers affected in his area have received nothing in compensation, he said.

"It's been a nightmare for a lot of people," Gulla said. "You're going to hear some people say this is the best thing that's happened to them, that it's the best thing since sliced bread. And they're making money, granted, but at what price, and what risk?"

Gulla was one of a half-dozen speakers to tell cautionary tales about the gas rush under way in Pennsylvania — and on the horizon in New York — at a public forum Tuesday night in a crowded parish hall at Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Elmira.

The event was organized by area environmental groups People for a Healthy Environment, Coalition to Protect New York, Committee to Preserve the Finger Lakes, and Pax Christi Upstate New York. It was clearly not a balanced panel on the issue, although recent chamber of commerce forums touting the economic benefits of gas exploration haven't been either: those have mostly featured speakers from the gas industry and pro-drilling elected officials.

Not all of Tuesday's speakers spoke directly against drilling.

One of them, Lou Allstadt, is a retired Mobil Oil Corp. executive vice president and a past director of the U.S. Oil and Gas Association. A Cooperstown resident, he has extensively reviewed the state Department of Environmental Conservation's proposed permitting guidelines — now being finalized — for high volume, horizontal hydraulic fracturing, and believes they are insufficient.

In his remarks, Allstadt gave a list of suggestions on how gas drilling might proceed safely in New York, some of which are being developed but are not yet widely implemented, he said.

Among them:

Developing a "green" fracking fluid, and ending government exemptions that allow the industry to use the fracking fluid it currently does. In the meantime, identifying markers should be added to fracking fluid, so if there is a case of suspected water contamination, it can be traced to the source, he said.

Using a closed loop system for drilling wastewater, rather than storing it in open, lined ponds where toxins can evaporate into the atmosphere. "It's a bad system, and it doesn't have to be that way," said Allstadt, who also called for greater recycling of fracking fluid at well sites.

Allstadt also called for seismic testing prior to each time a well is fracked, to identify underground cracks and fissures that could lead to toxins migrating to aquifers, he said.

Better standards are needed for the casings that line well bores near the surface and protect aquifers, he claimed.

There should also be greater setback distances for well pads from drinking water sources and residential areas. Also, the state should give local governments a say in regulating drilling locations, Allstadt said.

Saying human error contributes to most drilling accidents, he called for more stringent training for drilling crews, which often have a high turnover, he said. He also called for making gas companies post multi-million dollar "performance bonds" to fund cleanups should any incidents occur.

Allstadt also said the DEC needs to greatly increase its mineral resources staffing levels, saying it would be "impossible" to properly monitor a shale drilling boom with its current staffing levels. He also called for the state to form a separate agency to issue permits and collect revenues, so the DEC can focus solely on protecting the environment.

Organizer Susan Multer of People for a Healthy Environment said she counted approximately 240 people at Tuesday's forum.

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It is amazing what people will do when they see dollar signs. Paladino and people like Bill and Gloria will shoot from the hip for a few dollars. New York needs to do this right, we don't need environmental degradation for a few dollars, remember Love Canal.

New York needs to do this right. To think people would vote for a guy like Paladino who would have sacrificed the Southern Tier to make himself look like a hero throughout the rest of the state.

The cost of clean-up far exceeds the cost of prevention. And our prior generations have left us with more then our share of clean-up, where that tax money could have been used for more functional purposes. Either people like Paladino, Bill and Gloria have their heads in the sand, don't understand or don't care. We are in the 21st century and have learned that the solution to pollution is not dilution, it has to go somewhere.

Take your time NY, let's get this right. There is no amount of money that could replace the natural beauty we are blessed with in the Southern Tier.

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