

June 9, 2010



Sex abuse crisis energizing

The clerical sex abuse crisis is energizing Roman Catholic dissidents who want to open up the priesthood to women and ditch celibacy requirements.

PA gas explosion cause for concern

Daily Item

Whether drilling for oil or natural gas, the Susquehanna Valley found it is not immune to the explosive nature of mining the planet's resources.

While much of the nation has been focused on the aftermath of an April 20 oil rig explosion off Louisiana's coast, admittedly the nation's worst environmental disaster claiming 11 lives and spewing millions of gallons of oil, Pennsylvania has been developing its own energy field from Planet Earth.

The Marcellus Shale gas fields, located more than a mile beneath much of Pennsylvania's land mass, have the potential to be the second largest field in the world behind only the South Pars/Asalouyeh field between Iraq and Qatar. In BTUs, the domestic fields could produce the equivalent of 87 billion barrels of oil, enough to meet world demand for three years.

All the more reason to be concerned when a natural gas well near Clearfield exploded sending gas and polluted water 75 feet into the air last week. For 16 hours before the well was brought under control, the spewing fueled by unusually high underground gas pressure kept officials wondering what happened. EPA officials vow that a full investigation will be conducted: "This could have been a catastrophic incident that endangered life and property," said John Hanger, DEP secretary.

Little is known of the cause today, and the on-site Houston-based drilling company has declined to say how the accident happened. EOG Resources Inc., formerly part of Enron Corp., isn't talking publicly about the accident citing the ongoing investigation.

The controversial hydraulic fracturing process used to release the natural gas from compacted shale has been under scrutiny due to its use of unknown chemicals mixed with millions of gallons of water and sand blasted underground. What is known is the accident occurred just after the crew finished the hydraulic fracturing process and was clearing out debris when gas and brine shot upward.

Fortunately, polluted water flowing from the site and into the woods was stopped by a trench and a pump installed by another contractor, according to a DEP spokesman.

Blowouts in a natural gas well are rare and can be dangerous because a spark can set off an explosion, according to the president of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists. Typically a blowout preventer — a series of valves that sit atop a well — allows workers to control the pressure inside. Just such a device figured into the massive oil spill in the Gulf, but it failed to work properly.

While there is economic opportunity on the table for Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia and Ohio, the environmental price tag could be much larger and with unknown danger to public safety. There are more than 1,000 Marcellus Shale wells in Pennsylvania alone.

Legislation requiring the industry to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act is needed. Such legislation, pending in the Senate, would require drillers to disclose the chemicals it uses in the fracturing process. The possibility of contaminated drinking wells is too close to home for environmental experiment.

The Daily Item, Sunbury, PA - 200 Market Street - 17801