

Pressure point

Written by

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Environmentalists and lawmakers view it as possibly the biggest environmental threat to the Delaware River and state water supplies in our lifetime.

The gas drilling industry labels such fears as overblown and alarmist.

The contentious issue involves hydro-fracturing or “fracking” — the process of extracting natural gas from wells thousands of feet deep by injecting a mix of water, sand, and chemicals at high pressure to fracture the rock, causing the gas to flow more freely. The average frack uses between one million and six million gallons of water for each frack and many wells get fracked multiple times before going into production.

The crux of the concern arises from the fracking fluid itself — water mixed with numerous chemicals, many which are hazardous and toxic, including benzene, components of salt, and other volatile organic chemicals.

Fracking has been used extensively in western Pennsylvania, where it has opened up the previously inaccessible Marcellus Shale underground rock formation. While there is a sliver of such a rock formation in northwest New Jersey, the Garden State is

more concerned with runoff problems into the Delaware River as companies frack for gas in the Delaware River Basin. While drilling there is currently on hold, the moratorium will expire later this year, once the Delaware River Basin Commission adopts its fracking rules.

Environmental groups such as the Sierra Club contend that fracking can contaminate streams and rivers through the discharge of fracking fluids or accidental spills. Fracking fluid injected into the ground can potentially contaminate aquifers, the groups say.

Last week, the Highland Park Borough Council passed a resolution calling for a statewide ban of the controversial natural gas drilling technique. Highland Park became the first Middlesex County town to join three other New Jersey communities (Holland and Bethlehem townships in Hunterdon County and Byram Township in Sussex County) calling on state and federal regulators to oppose fracking out of concerns for public safety and impacts to

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more than 10,000 wells — which he thinks could climb as high as 70,000 — in the upper Delaware River, the Poconos and the Delaware River in its history, and this is one of the biggest environmental threats to this region that we've ever seen," said Jeff Tittel, executive director of the Sierra Club in New Jersey. "A lot of Central Jersey gets a lot of water from the Delaware and Raritan River Canal. You've got major supply intakes in towns like North Brunswick which takes it directly from the Raritan River. Elizabeth takes some of their water, and even New Brunswick, which has a large population, gets some of its water from the Delaware River."

fracking, but candidly, we do think some border on the alarmist," Benton said. "Fracking is a process that the industry has been engaged in for almost 60 years. Technology is always evolving, always improving. It is a process that has demonstrated that it can be done and safely and in accordance with the highest environmental standards."

Benton said he looked at Department of Environmental Protection comments and documents concerning the immediate proposed drilling for the Delaware River Basin.

"They're talking about 30 wells in the Delaware River Basin," he said. "This can be done, this can be managed, and it can really make a difference. What we want is something that adheres to the highest industry standards across the board. We believe these extractions can be done without contamination."

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"We know the scientific steps and the appropriate government regulation can, along with industry practice, result in safe standards, and we're working toward that end," he added.

drilling. The study also found measurable amounts of methane in 51, or 85 percent, of the wells. In those wells closest to fracking, methane levels were 17 times higher on average.

pursues a major study on fracking, and ~~Beside industry assurances for a fracking, source, does safety, a gas source~~ ~~Simple study found that the controversial drilling practice appears to be~~ ~~“Outgassing groundwater levels with~~ ~~out being in future state, Pennsylvania and~~ ~~ap state New York, going through the process of closing nuclear plants.”~~

A recent article in USA Today reported that ~~These are the results of a 60-well administration~~ ~~says that gas found that 10 of the 526~~ ~~wells with natural gas produced~~ ~~sites made elevated methane levels, amount~~ ~~to be up to 2035 the water could catch fire.~~ Such levels were found in only one of the 34 wells beyond a kilometer of such

The gas drilling industry, however, criticized the research for insufficient data, and the authors of the study admitted they had no baseline data — making it impossible to characterize the condition of the water wells before the drilling took place.

Meanwhile, New Jersey lawmakers have refused to sit idly by while the debate over the hazards of fracking grows more heated. Committees in both the state Senate and Assembly have each passed bills banning fracking in the state.

“Fracking is something that really I wasn’t that familiar until the bills came up,” said Assemblyman Peter Barnes III, D-Edison. “But once you go through all the bills and read all the pamphlets before the committee meeting you say, ‘Whoa, is this

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as bad as I think it is?’ And I think it is.

“The reason why fracking is not controversial yet,” he added, “is that people don’t understand what fracking is, and they don’t understand the potential for water pollution. I think if they understood — what it’s about and its potential for hurting groundwater and major bodies of

Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and one from the federal government. The commission may vote on adopting final regulations this coming September or December which would pave the way for states to consider applications for fracking, provided those applications do not conflict with existing rules and regulations of the respective states.

water, like the Delaware and the Delaware River, has its origin in the Catskills Mountains of New York state with its main stem starting in Hancock, N.Y. From there, it stretches 330 miles south to the mouth of Delaware Bay near Cape May and Lewes, Del.

Water from the Delaware River Basin serves more than 15 million people. Approximately 7.8 million people live within the watershed boundary of the basin, which also supplies about half of New York City's water supply. A sizable portion of New Jersey residents get water from the river via the Delaware-Raritan River Canal.

As is stands now, a moratorium on drilling is in place at the Delaware River Basin as its commission considers a record 58,000 comments that were submitted regarding its draft of regulations released last December. The commission consists of five members with representatives from New

Last week, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection fined Chesapeake Energy \$900,000 for contaminating water supplies in Bradford County through fracking in the Marcellus Shale there. Mike Krancer, secretary for the Department of Environmental Protection told Reuters news agency that "the water well contamination fine is the largest single penalty DEP has ever assessed against an oil and gas operator."

While New Jersey appears on its way to banning fracking, other state legislatures are not likely to go so far. That leaves N.J. lawmakers worried about potential downstream toxic run-off coming our way.

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Sen. Bob Smith, D-Middlesex, said there is a "huge concern" about the potential to pollute the state's water supplies with toxic and carcinogenic chemicals.

"We're urging all of the agencies with jurisdiction to go slow, take your time, and make sure that were not creating a problem like we did with all the toxic and hazardous waste sites in the United States of America where years later we've got to come back and clean them up," Smith said.

