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Rail will play major role in gas drilling, expert says

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Published: October 15, 2010

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PLAINS TWP. - If natural gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale is going to prevail, it needs rail.

The gas companies are so far from their suppliers and they are consuming commodities such as sand and pipe in such quantities that rail service is going to be crucial, said Todd Hunter, director of marketing for the North Shore Railroad. Hunter's comments came Thursday during a meeting of the NEPA Logistics Club at Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs.

"Without rail, shale fails," he said, quoting Lycoming County Transportation Planner Mark Murawski.

Although Hunter lives and works in Williamsport, where natural gas development is exploding, he believes Northeastern Pennsylvania, including Luzerne and Lackawanna counties, will be seeing activity too. The gas play is here to stay for the long term, life as we know it is changing, and it's coming fast, he said.

"We just got started, folks," Hunter said. "It's a year or two away before this thing really gets rolling."

North Shore Railroad, started in 1984, has six lines with 240 miles of track in northern and central Pennsylvania, 90 employees and owns 24 locomotives plus has leased two more to keep up with demand, Hunter said.

The railroad had growth prior to the development of the Marcellus Shale, but, he said, "The rush started for us in August 2008."

At that time, the North Shore Railroad moved its first carload of frack sand. Hydraulic fracturing or "fracking" involves blasting millions of gallons of water thousands of feet underground to crack the shale and release the gas. Sand is added to the water to prop the cracks open, allowing the gas to flow more freely.

Since 2008, the North Shore has added five active frack sand terminals, three active terminals for pipe, two gas field heavy haulers, and a loader for brine water, Hunter said.

Further impacts on the North Shore include 13 new rail facilities in various stages of completion, rail service hours and days expanded to include evenings, weekends and holidays; and the addition of new track switches, he said.

But there will be challenges along with growth, Hunter said. There are few rail-ready, properly zoned properties in the Marcellus drilling area, getting sufficient rail capacity and finding qualified employees is difficult, and complaints about train horns and other issues during off-hours, he said.

Since gas companies are from other parts of the country, they don't have a local understanding and rail as a transportation option is new to many of them, Hunter said. They don't realize Pennsylvania has mountains and rivers, which can make rail more desirable than roads for fast transit.

Hunter related how a man from one gas company told him, "You know, in Texas, 60 miles is 60 minutes. In Pennsylvania, 60 miles can be six hours."

Besides the talk by Hunter, Lawrence Malski of Clarks Summit, President of Pennsylvania Northeast Regional Rail Authority, received the Harry Duckworth Award for Excellence in Logistics.

Malski mentioned the growth the authority has experienced since 1985: the line has increased to more than 100 miles and has induced 11 new industries to locate around the region. With the opportunities presented by the Marcellus Shale, he is sure it will expand further.

Regarding passenger service, Malski said the rail authority did not receive the "major chunk" of federal funding it was hoping for to establish a high-speed rail line from Scranton to New York, but noted that perseverance is key.

"Like everything, it's ups and it's downs," he said, adding that it is a down time for government funding.

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