
Editorial

Regulate this waste

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A bill stalled in the State Senate that would make the hazardous waste produced by the natural gas drilling process known as hydraulic fracturing subject to the same regulations as other hazardous waste deserves support.

The legislation (A.7013, by Assemblyman Robert K. Sweeney, D-Nassau, chairman of the Committee on Environmental Conservation; S.4616, by State Sen. Tony Avella, D-Queens) has strong support from freshman Sen. Mark J. Grisanti, R-Buffalo.

Hydraulic fracturing, or hydrofracking, involves injecting millions of gallons of water mixed with various chemicals and sand into some shale formations deep underground. The process shatters the shale and releases the trapped natural gas.

When the gas rises to the surface, some of the contaminated water returns with it, along with some naturally existing underground brine.

States that allow hydrofracking are still trying to figure out what to do with the waste, saltier than sea water and tainted with hydrofracking chemicals.

Pennsylvania is the only state that allows the huge amounts of wastewater, partially treated for potential environmentally harmful substances, to be dumped into the state's waterways. Beyond dumping, which many large drilling companies have committed to curtailing or discontinuing, some drillers have opted to reuse the contaminated water for new wells in a closed-loop system.

But hundreds of millions of gallons of wastewater reportedly is being sent to water treatment plants that discharge the treated water into rivers. This is an unacceptable practice and, to its credit, the Buffalo Sewer Authority has a policy not to accept any hydrofracking waste. The authority restated its policy earlier this year after it was disclosed that its sewage treatment system may have accepted some hydro-fracking waste.

The question of what to do with the waste is all the more important here in New York,

where the drilling industry seeks to exploit the gas locked in Marcellus shale formations in much of the Southern Tier.

While we're not ready to say whether hydrofracking is good or bad for the state, we believe that a moratorium on hydrofracking, set to expire soon, should be extended by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo until the state Department of Environmental Conservation completes its study of hydrofracking and the issue has been carefully and completely weighed.

Industry has its arguments in favor of hydraulic fracturing and one of the most compelling is the thousands of jobs that could be created, along with lower heating costs. Those are obviously major factors, but there is also good reason to pause before embarking upon what is a complex, possibly hazardous, process.

The state currently does not regulate hydraulic fracturing or its waste. Subjecting that waste to the same regulations as other hazardous waste is a good place to start.

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