

Scientist says the spin is on

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State government's top scientist on the underground features of New York has never weighed in on the contentious matter of drilling in the great Marcellus shale layers stretching beneath a big part of upstate. Until now.

"The worst spin on the worst incidents are treated as if it's going to be the norm here," said Taury Smith, the state geologist, a self-described liberal Democrat more concerned with global warming than extraction of natural gas from one of the largest sources available in the United States. "This could really help us fight climate change; this is a huge gift, this shale."

He said he has been examining the science of hydrofracturing the shale for three years and has found no cases in which the process has led to groundwater contamination, although several portrayals by anti-fracking groups and featured in the press have raised concerns about underground pools being harmed because of drilling.

"Those are exaggerated problems; each incident wasn't the result of hydro-fracking. There were incidents of groundwater contamination near frack sites, but they were unrelated," Smith said. He said the industry should be strictly monitored by the Department of Environmental Conservation, and should be encouraged to move the nation away from coal-fired power and to the more environmentally friendly natural gas.

"I'm for a strong regulation by DEC. They have no vested interest. The environmental groups have a vested interest. The companies have a huge profit at stake, so I wouldn't trust them either," Smith, who works for the State Museum said. "If there's one group you can trust it's the DEC."

Former DEC Commissioner Alexander "Pete" Grannis, who now is the first deputy comptroller, said he agrees with Smith that the dangers of fracking are overblown. He thinks the DEC is on course to set solid regulations.

Smith said the issue has been a major money-maker for some environmental organizations who have used it to raise funds for their treasuries. Allowing fracking, he added, would be a huge boost for New York job creation and for income and business tax revenues. A potential "severance tax" like those in other states that are assessed on the industry for extracting the gas could be another boon to the state, he said.

Smith said the average drilling complex used 8.4 million gallons per day of water in the Susquehanna River basin, compared to 20 million per day for golf courses.

SUNY loses its lobbyist

As she tries to convince the Legislature to go along with her ambitious agenda, State University of New York Chancellor Nancy Zimpher is doing it without the seasoned in-house lobbyist whose public statements recently contrasted with goals she has embraced.

Michael Trunzo's departure comes shortly after The Chronicle of Higher Education quoted him as suggesting SUNY was watering down the empowerment plan Zimpher has been pushing for months.

SUNY spokesman Morgan Hook, who has said Trunzo's comments about a scaled back agenda was unauthorized and inaccurate, said SUNY thanks him for his contributions during his nine-year career as chief lobbyist. Hook said it is unclear if Trunzo's post as vice chancellor for government relations, which paid him \$194,400 a year, will be filled. He took the job while his father, Caesar Trunzo, R-Islip, served in a GOP-led Senate.

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