

News

'Silent majority' is pro-drilling New York needs boost, advocates say

By Steve Israel

Published: 2:00 AM - 05/18/10

They call themselves the silent majority. They're farmers and sportsmen, educators and entrepreneurs. And they want to drill for natural gas. Now.

The pro-drillers say their voices have been drowned out by a gushing of anti-drilling publicity. Elitist, deep-pocketed environmentalists have put drilling on hold in New York, they say, made the federal government again study its safety and forced politicians to turn against it or sit on the fence. They say the anti-drilling publicity machine has turned the spotlight on the few drilling accidents, not the thousands of wells that have been safely drilled across the country, and in New York. All this despite the fact that nearly twice as many people favor drilling as oppose it, according to last week's Record poll. The pro-drillers say drilling the gas-rich Marcellus shale beneath Sullivan County – and leasing their land at thousands of dollars per acre, with royalties up to 20 percent – will pump millions into the state's dying economy, and their pockets. It will allow farmers in places like Sullivan to save dying farms and the green landscape. It will allow overtaxed landowners to save their property. And it will revive struggling counties like Sullivan by creating thousands of jobs.

'More money, less taxes'

"It will create the biggest boom in the history of Sullivan County," says retired educator Noel van Swol of Long Eddy, who heads a coalition of landowners with 70,000 acres in western Sullivan and Delaware counties they plan to lease to gas companies. "It will democratize wealth."

"I want the state to have more money and I want to pay less taxes so we can all live here, not just rich people," says Jeffersonville's Inge Grafe-Kieklak, who with her husband, Ed Allees, put up a pro-drilling billboard on Route 17.

"The situation is simpler than you think," sums up Al Larson, a retired schools superintendent who heads another landowners coalition with more than 15,000 acres in the Bethel area, including his own 80 acres. "The state is \$9 (billion) in debt. Teachers and civil servants are getting laid off and farmers are losing their farms. And we're sitting on many billions of dollars of natural gas. How can we wait?"

But despite the fact that the pro-drillers have some of the world's largest corporations on their side, they say their voices have not been heard.

"This is almost a David and Goliath situation," says Larson, who points to deep-pocketed families like the "Kennedys and Rockefellers," who he calls "cocktail party conservationists," as anti-gas drilling supporters. He says leasing land for drilling and then restoring it when it's producing gas will actually save it.

"They're not living off the land, they're just sitting home clipping coupons," says van Swol – despite the fact that one of the leading spokesmen for the environmentalists is a farmer.

Tough regulations

Yet despite their anger – and envy – the pro-drillers concede that the anti-drillers have been able to get their message across because they're better organized.

"This is a religion with these people," says van Swol.

But look at the facts, says his land coalition partner, dairy farmer Bill Graby of Callicoon.

The state already has some of the toughest regulations in the country – and they're only getting tougher, now that the state Department of Environmental Conservation is updating those rules.

They're regulations that must be enforced with vigilance, says Larson, who uses this analogy: If you tell a contractor to build a \$100,000 home and you go away for months, you might get a shoddy home. But if you oversee it every day, you'll likely get what you want.

"Do I believe they can do it right? Yes I do," says Larson. "Do I believe they will if I put a gun to their head and say you have to do it and we'll be watching, yes I do."

As for the fact that there isn't enough staff on the DEC to enforce those regulations?

"When we have the money from drilling, we will have enough money to hire people to control it," says Grafe-Kieklak.

'Playing hardball'

As for the accidents in places like Dimock, Pa., that have polluted drinking water and forced the state to fine and suspend drilling by one of the nation's largest outfits, Cabot Oil and Gas?

"Do you stop driving or flying because of accidents?" she asks. "You cannot live your life in fear."

And if all these arguments fail and drilling is delayed past the issuance of the new rules in the fall?

The silent majority vows no silence this election season.

"We are playing hardball," says van Swol, "and this is not a game."

Grafe-Kieklak says votes will speak louder than her billboard:

"The silent majority may not be talking now," she says, "but in November, they will vote. November will be judgment day."
sisrael@th-record.com

THE OPPOSITION

Are the anti-gas drilling activists really Goliaths versus the pro-drilling Davids, as some pro-drillers say? Are they "cocktail

party conservationists?" And will tough DEC regulations assure that drilling is safe?

We asked an anti-drilling activist, Callicoon Center's Bruce Ferguson, of Catskill Citizens for Safe Energy, for his take on some pro-drilling claims:

- On the environmentalists as Goliaths: "That's absurd. They have multi-billion dollar corporations behind them. We don't."

- On "cocktail party conservationists": "We're concerned about public health and the safety of the water. I didn't even know there were cocktail parties anymore."

- On the comparison of gas- drilling accidents to car or plane accidents: "They're still talking about drilling with open pits, with toxic chemicals. Let's see someone try to do it right. They never do. It's 'do it cheap and do it fast.'"

- Drilling royalties will provide enough funds to add enforcement staff: "Ridiculous. I've yet to hear any company say we'll monitor a well before and after drilling. No single company has stepped forward to say we'll abide by the best management practices and pay for road damage or monitoring wells."

- Drilling royalties will allow farmers to save their farms: "The best that can be said is that some farmers will cash in. But you're talking about serious industrialization of the landscape, and you can't farm an industrial site. This has nothing to do with preservation."

Steve Israel