



Stop freaking about fracking: It's possible to drill safely for natural gas

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Cindy Schultz/Times Union

Petitioners urge Gov. Cuomo to protect the drinking water in New York from the gas drilling method of hydrofracking in the Marcellus Shale. The news a few years ago that upstate New York is sitting on billions of dollars worth of natural gas should have been cause for celebration.

Previously out-of-reach pockets of precious fuel - stored in a huge underground rock formation known as the Marcellus Shale - could now be affordably tapped, thanks to cutting-edge drilling techniques.

Great! We could burn less coal, crank out less smog, pay less money to Middle East potentates - and create a passel of jobs, to boot. Right here in the U.S. of A.

But no. First, we had to freak out about fracking.

It started with horror stories about drilling-related pollution in other states. A documentary showed a guy setting fire to the stuff coming out of his kitchen tap. Movie star Mark Ruffalo - who lives in Sullivan County - warned New Yorkers about "the attack that's taking place on their water."

Before long, millions had rallied to the anti-fracking cause - with many demanding an outright ban on all drilling, especially in the vast areas that supply drinking water to New York City and Syracuse.

How depressing.

Is this what America has come to in the 21st century? Are we so terrified of technology and distrustful of business that we'd rather just let a hugely valuable resource sit underground, going to waste?

Or can we calm down long enough to analyze this for what it is: an engineering and regulatory challenge to be solved, not an ideological crusade to be won or lost.

What we need is more rational, pragmatic voices like that of Stuart Gruskin, who was executive deputy commissioner of the state Department of Environment Conservation from 2007 through 2010.

"The fact that bad things happened in other places doesn't mean bad things are going to happen in New York," Gruskin says. "In fact, New York has deliberately taken a position of, 'Think first and drill later.'"

Fracking, short for "hydraulic fracturing," is a drilling method in which water is pumped at high pressure into a well to crack the surrounding shale, which releases gas.

The industry has downplayed the known hazards of drilling, he says, while the anti-fracking forces have mischaracterized the risk. Now a private consultant with no ties to drilling, Gruskin is free to speak frankly - and clear up the many misconceptions about fracking.

First, he notes, it's not really a new technology. In fact, there are some 14,000 fracked wells operating in New York today - many in aquifers used for drinking water - with no catastrophic effect.

But the newer wells would go many times deeper, as much as a mile or more down, then a mile or more horizontally. They also require much more water - millions of gallons per well. This is why the DEC is proceeding cautiously.

Second, the biggest danger is not from fracturing itself, which usually happens too deep to affect the water table. What can cause trouble is faulty design and construction of well shafts near the surface. Another significant risk is mishandling of fracking fluid, which contains toxic additives, before and after it's injected.

Third - contrary to what you may have heard - fracking is by no means unregulated, at least not in New York. In fact, New York has some of the tightest regulations in the country - and they're bound to get tighter after the DEC finishes a painstaking analysis. Plus a fracking moratorium imposed by former Gov. David Paterson continues through June - which Gov. Cuomo may now extend because of an accident in Pennsylvania.

Fourth, flammable faucets don't necessarily have anything to do with drilling. Natural gas is natural - and can and does leach into ground water on its own.

Gruskin is no industry shill. He stops short of endorsing fracking in New York until all the facts are in. But unlike most people in this debate, he has no monetary motive or ideological ax to grind. And he trusts the experts and professionals at his former agency to do the right thing - and thinks other New Yorkers should, too.

"Everyone's got to take a deep breath and say, 'Let's get back to facts and science,'" he says. "And that's what DEC is in the process of doing. Everyone who's out there shouting and screaming should let DEC finish the job."

He's right. Environmentalists especially should respect the process. They are, after all, the side that believes in strong government regulation. They need to tone down the "no fracking way" rhetoric and help the DEC make New York a showcase for safe, responsible gas drilling.

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