
BUFFALO'S BUSINESS

Why muzzle pro-fracking geologist?



By **David Robinson**

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Updated: May 29, 2011, 6:33 AM

Where's Langhorne "Taury" Smith? Back in early April, Smith, the state geologist, came to the University at Buffalo to give a talk as part of a lecture series the school was sponsoring on the hot-button issue of drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale in

New York.

At the time, I was a little surprised that Smith was coming to UB at all. Just weeks before, he had churned up a big swirl in Albany with comments he made to Albany Times-Union columnist James M. Odatto.

Smith, saying he was more concerned with global warming than tapping into the vast supplies of natural gas available in the Marcellus, told Odatto: “This could really help us fight climate change; this is a huge gift, this shale.”

The backlash was immediate. Smith’s bosses at the state Education Department immediately put a muzzle on him, barring him from speaking with reporters. Environmentalists criticized Smith for saying many of the reported problems involving ground water contamination near drilling sites have been exaggerated.

Yet Smith still came to UB. It was a fascinating talk before about 150 people, one that almost could have been titled “The Geology of the Marcellus for Dummies.” Smith, who works for the New York State Museum in Albany, had a nice way of explaining why this 300-foot thick layer of dark shale, about a mile below the ground, holds such potential as a source of natural gas.

He also was obviously gun-shy. He dodged audience questions about hydraulic fracturing, the controversial practice of shooting chemically treated water at high pressure into gas wells to blast open the pores that hold the natural gas within the shale and allow it to escape. Marcellus drilling is on hold in New York while the state works on new rules to regulate it.

So a couple of weeks ago, when a high school student e-mailed me asking for recommendations on some good sources of information about the Marcellus, I immediately thought of Smith’s lecture.

Marcus I. Bursik, UB geology department chairman and the organizer of the lecture series, said before Smith’s talk that the videos would be posted on the Web as a resource.

But when I went to the website, www.geology.buffalo.edu, to get a link for the student, I found that videos for the first six lectures had been posted—all except Smith’s presentation. Smith’s 63-slide PowerPoint presentation was posted. But no video.

“We are sorry but the talk by Langhorne ‘Taury’ Smith cannot be made available at this time,” the site said.

Apparently Smith’s muzzle from his Albany bosses didn’t keep him from speaking to a packed lecture hall, but making his public remarks available for broader viewing—and for posterity—is another matter.

Andy Leahy, a pro-drilling blogger from Syracuse, calls it censorship. He filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the state Education Department for materials related to Smith’s UB talk. He got a CD of the PowerPoint, but no video. He recently filed a similar request with UB.

“What would the noise factor be if he was anti-fracking and got similarly censored?”

Leahy, an energy industry land title searcher, said last week.

“It is an interesting twist, don’t you think? The academic community is ordinarily exceedingly touchy—and rightly so—about issues of intellectual freedom, censorship, and so on. And yet here we find an eerie, deafening silence over what the bureaucrats have done—and are doing— to Smith,” Leahy wrote on his blog.

Bursik was out of town and wasn’t available to comment, a UB spokeswoman said. A state Education Department spokesman didn’t return a phone call.

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Comments

SORT: **NEWEST FIRST** | OLDEST FIRST

I would love to see what Mr Thomas has to say now that the report about methane appearing in wells near fracking sites has been published. Methane is 20x more potent as a greenhouse gas than CO2.

VALERIE NIEDERHOFFER, BUFFALO, NY on Tue May 31, 2011 at 01:12 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

I am sure Langhorne and Mr Robinson might have had a different slant had they been aware of the Cornell University study that connects fracking to Methane gas releases that put natural gas extraction on an even plane with coal burning. Climate change studies grow increasingly concerned at the increasing role of methane in Global Warming. I don't think many of the people involved in the UB series had opportunity to review the Duke University study (see: <http://media.philly.com/documents/Hydrofracking2011.pdf>) that links fracking to well water contamination with documentation that demonstrates decreasing contamination as one moves away from the well. In cases like these it is not a question of environmental concerns versus jobs as much as it is are we willing to trade away sections of the nation and destroy live ability for a twenty year supply of natural gas. Are we ready to abandon entire watersheds for twenty year jobs. The lack of a national or regional EIS has deprived most areas of the nation from weighing the detriments and the benefits. Are we in New York willing to turn our southern tier, including Allegheny State Park to one huge Love Canal?

HAP KLEIN, TONAWANDA, NY on Mon May 30, 2011 at 06:09 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

Mr. Robinson would have done well to advise the student to watch the documentary "GasLand." It gives a realistic depiction of what New Yorkers can expect if they allow fracking in the Marcellus Shale. New York State is too beautiful to be turned into the fractured wasteland left by the drilling industry. And its

citizens depend on the potable drinking water for subsistence. The federal government has done a major disservice to the populace by allowing this to happen.

MEREDITH SANDERSON, DOUGLASVILLE, GA on Sun May 29, 2011 at 09:28 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

It appears that the only way to achieve consensus in the scientific community is to censor and punish the heretics.

MICHALE SZYMANSKI, ORCHARD PARK, NY on Sun May 29, 2011 at 01:43 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

I appreciate the last two post, but would prefer to have access to words and presentation of an "Expert." Once again, I see the hypocrisy from those who usually espouse freedom, but are willing to muzzle dissent. Information is the key; facts, dialogue, debate. This could be intentional censorship, more information is needed, but the absence of a contrary presentation looks suspicious. Our Country desperately needs alternative sources of energy, we complain about high prices, complain about global warming, we complain about the environment; I get that. But we will never come to a concensus by concealing information which may prove someone, or one party, wrong. If it takes 10 years to bring the oil from Anwar to market, so be it. At least we'll be moving forward. If information shows fracking to be dangerous, then maybe the debate will help develop safer measure to extract the gas. Just stop hiding and lying about the facts.

DAVID STABLER, LANCASTER, NY on Sun May 29, 2011 at 10:43 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

I think Doctor Bursik had better intentions in the lecture series that what has emerged as a series of pro-industry or at least pro-horizontal drilling presentations. Consideration of fracking to its geologic or extraction aspects one would agree with Smith and most geologists that it does represent enhanced access to vast reserves of natural gas. It is the ancillary aspects of fracking that disturb. The detrimental aspects of the drilling have forced responsible government agencies to initiate a patchwork of environmental reviews. Have no sympathy for the muzzling of Langhorne Smith and his comments. The State of New York has mounted a huge and very expensive study of fracking that is due to be released in June and then might ban fracking or begin a review process to authorize it. For any state employee or representative to speak or make announcements on such a controversial issue while the review is underway does so at peril. Langhorne, sure did not benefit his career by opening his yapper in praise a practice that could be banned by his employers. The very lecture series represents the problems of fracking. Based on solid business geologic and engineering data the energy companies have invested millions of dollars in equipment and public relations and lobbying efforts to assure vast profits from the extraction of the gas from the Marcellus formation. Then as problems emerge from the process, the destruction of the quality of life in the drilling areas, contamination of water, methane release and more, environmental groups and government agencies realize that by side stepping environmental

review they may have allowed creation of a Frankenstein in our midst and now hurry to examine or take lat action.

HAP KLEIN, TONAWANDA, NY on Sun May 29, 2011 at 09:58 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

HYDRO-FRACKING is water being pumped. HYDRA-FRACKING is any liquid (toxic or non-toxic) being pumped. The danger lies in half-attended to drilling, not done properly which has the possibility of contaminating ground water. Farmers depend on well water. The Nestle Company depends on acquafiers for bottled water. Rural communities depend on ground water resources for potable water and drinking water. Part of the fear comes from the irreplaceable damage that has been done by above ground strip mining in the US, where dikes collapsed, and the toxic sludge got into everything. Carelessness in fracking can cause permanent damage by leeching chemicals into ground water supplies. In both cases when anything went wrong the taxpayers paid for the cleanup through the EPA. HYDRA-Fracking is not covered by the Pure Water Act. The Pro-Fracking lobbyists sought to that end successfully in Washington DC. This is why Anti-Fracking people in NY State want state laws, not to hinder hydra-fracking, but keep the public and farm industry water wells safe from toxic and not toxic spills harmful to life. Diesel is the latest toxin being used in hydra-fracking. Hydra-Fracking Corporations are fighting Federal,State,City,Town and local environmental laws by not telling the ingredients used in the hydra-fracking to the various environmental agencies, they say the ingredients are secret recipes bound by business laws, that if known, would give their competition an edge on the hydra-fracking process and could put them out of business. Business also uses the guise of employment. Wouldn't you rather have people employed than unemployed? We already have seen the harmful affects of lax environmental laws in WNY? Love Canal is a good example.

PHILIP JAMES JAROSZ, BUFFALO, NY on Sun May 29, 2011 at 07:24 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

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