

Steve Israel: How NY Times gas-drilling series might affect region

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"A game changer," is what anti-gas drillers called it.

"A hit piece," is how pro drillers described it.

It's The New York Times' recent three-part series on gas drilling.

Through hundreds of unpublished or suppressed documents and interviews with scores of officials and regular folk, the series aims to show that drilling isn't as safe as the industry or supporters claim.

"The dangers to the environment and health are greater than previously understood," it says, and "regulations have not kept pace with the natural-gas industry's expansion."

The hazards, the Times says, include naturally occurring radioactive waste and added chemicals from drilling, which often end up in rivers used for drinking water. Gas has also "seeped into underground drinking-water supplies," writes reporter Ian Urbina, and "air pollution ... is a growing threat, too."

So what's it mean for us in New York, which is still readying regulations for the horizontal drilling method of hydraulic fracturing or "fracking?"

A lot — if officials heed the stories.

Some federal Environmental Protection Agency staffers are so concerned about the potential dangers that they suggested a moratorium in the New York City watershed area, a sliver of which sits in Sullivan County, EPA documents show.

But when the EPA sent its official comments to the state, that suggestion was deleted — an instance, the Times says, of the gas industry's political pressure.

But it wasn't just New York City that worried the EPA.

"We also have concerns about water quality impacts throughout the state," the EPA wrote. "Just because fewer people rely on upstate water sources does not imply that these supplies are not also worthy of protection."

So if the state abides by the EPA staffer suggestions, there might not be drilling in Sullivan.

One reason for that caution, The Times writes, is radioactive waste, often discharged into rivers — a claim the industry says is overstated, since much waste is recycled and radioactive levels are safe.

So what would happen here?

While state regulations aren't ready, the agency overseeing drilling along the Delaware River corridor says its rules for treating waste "would be more stringent" than any state, according to Delaware River Basin Commission Deputy Director Robert Tudor.

But there are no waste treatment facilities in the corridor. So the gas companies would treat and transport the waste.

"And it's up to them to track it," says Tudor.

Bottom line for the local drilling debate?

For one advocate, The Times was just "mostly wrong."

The revelations about radioactive waste were "blown out of proportion," says Tom Shepstone, a planning consultant for Sullivan towns who's leased his land in Pennsylvania for drilling. Even if the material was dumped in waterways, "that doesn't mean you would drink directly from it," he says.

"But to the extent there isn't enough testing (of water) done, there should be more," he says. "I have no problem with that."

But it wasn't just what was in the series that matters, it was what was left out, Shepstone says. He points to Colorado, where water may have been polluted but not from drilling. Plus, the articles largely omitted economic benefits, which could save the open spaces so many fear would be ruined.

For anti drillers such as Wes Gillingham of Catskill Mountainkeeper, the Times raised issues pro drillers have long dismissed — such as the existence of radioactive waste "which doesn't go away, even if it is recycled."

The bottom line?

"It substantiates what a lot of people have been saying all along," says Gillingham, "that there are more questions about drilling than answers."

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