

Pennsylvania Provides Cautionary Tale for Drilling Region

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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New Yorkers need to pay attention to the drilling problems across the border, says John Quigley. The former Secretary of Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources addressed municipal officials, town planners and attorneys at last month's Finger Lakes Institute conference in Geneva. He warned that Pennsylvania's experiences with shale drilling should provide a cautionary tale. Not just about Marcellus shale, he said, but about resource extraction in general.

Pennsylvania has seen waves of natural resource extraction as companies have drilled for oil, mined coal and cleared millions of acres of timber to fuel the industrial revolutions. "In each case PA got it wrong," Quigley said. "They privatized profits and socialized the costs." The end result, he said, is a blighted environment, un-cemented and unplugged abandoned wells, 5,000 miles of dead streams (acid mine waste), air pollution, blighted communities and a declining population.

"The boom-bust cycle has ravaged the state," Quigley said.

Marcellus shale underlies two thirds of Pennsylvania. Right now 7 million acres are tied up in gas companies – that's a quarter of the state's land mass, Quigley said. Energy companies estimate that over the next two decades they'll drill 60,000 to 200,000 new wells. For every 60,000 wells they'll need 15,000 miles of gathering lines, he explained, and 1700 miles of pipelines that will fragment the landscape.

Marcellus shale is only part of the story, Quigley said. Industry leaders predict that they'll be drilling Utica shale for the next 100 years. "That will have more cumulative impact than all of the previous extractive industries combined," he said.

With only 3300 Marcellus wells drilled so far, it's hard for people to visualize the implications of large-scale industrialized shale-gas drilling, Quigley said. The important question is whether states can adequately regulate the drilling, monitor the activities and mitigate the impacts. Pennsylvania, he said, was slow to regulate the industry and has been "playing catch up".

"We need to have disclosure of chemicals," Quigley said. Other things on his must have list include: protecting local government authorities; reducing surface impacts that fragment the landscape; monitoring drilling wastes and groundwater. "We need an abundance of caution in protecting irreplaceable resources," he said.

New York may be ahead of PA in some regards, Stu Gruskin told conference attendees. Gruskin served as the Executive Deputy Commissioner of NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) from 2007 through 2010. He addressed the regulatory environment in NY.

"Back in 2008 we [DEC] realized that we wanted the environmental issues evaluated before permits were issued for high volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing," he said. But DEC never banned the technique; any company desiring to use horizontal hydro-fracking could always conduct their own environmental review, Gruskin said.

Marcellus is a big deal, he said, because it sits at the intersection of environmental, energy and economic concerns. Shale-gas drilling potentially represents a source of revenue for towns and landowners, but the scale of that development has brought many concerns to the fore. Not only that, but DEC has been decimated by budget cuts, Gruskin said. "In order for there to be any kind of efficient program in NY we need adequate oversight and enforcement."

Gruskin emphasized that the primary mission of DEC is to protect the environment. The agency will permit resource extraction technologies as long as they fit within that mission, he said shrugging off concerns about federal exemptions from clean air and clean water acts. "NY State can go further than the federal government."

The purpose behind drafting a SGEIS (Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement) is to identify what is different about horizontal hydro-fracking and develop a supplement to the GEIS to identify and address those differences.

"In September 2009 we [DEC] released a draft to the public and said 'have at it'. And they did," Gruskin said. Two years and 14,000 comments later the DEC is publishing the revised draft. One major change was the decision to exclude the Syracuse and New York City watersheds because of their Filtration Avoidance Determinations (FADs). "These are not generic, so they should not be part of the SGEIS," noted Gruskin.

The SGEIS is still a work in progress, reminded Gruskin, "one that needs more public engagement." Unfortunately, debate over shale-gas drilling has become so divisive that at this point he feels it is doing a disservice to the public.

"The anti faction relies on experience in other states and tends to exaggerate the dangers," Gruskin said. "Pro-drillers, on the other hand, suggest that any delay will cause people to 'lose out' on economic benefits and exaggerate the safety of shale-gas drilling."

As of press time the DEC had not yet completed the revised SGEIS. You may read the preliminary SGEIS online at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/energy/75370.html>

Print copies are available for reading at:

- Tompkins County Public Library, 101 East Green Street, Ithaca;
- Candor Public Library, 2 Bank Street, Candor;
- Coburn Free Library, 275 Main Street, Owego;
- Steele Memorial Library, 101 E. Church Street, Elmira.