

Drilling Not Compatible with Multiple-Use Forest Plans

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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Two months ago the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) unveiled their draft Strategic Plan for managing the more than 785,000 acres of the state forest. The plan, says DEC, focuses on ecosystem health and diversity, economic benefits, recreational opportunities, forest conservation and sustainable management.

Critics point out that the Strategic Plan includes recommendations for oil and gas development – recommendations for industrialized development that is not compatible with other forest uses.

“We already know what the impacts of drilling are on forests,” says Bill Belitskus, board president for the Allegheny Defense Project. He joined Katy Dunlap, from Trout Unlimited in Pennsylvania, and Shellie Northrop, an active member of two northern PA region hiking and trail associations, to share observations about the impacts of drilling on outdoor recreation at a November 1 forum in Lansing.

For Belitskus, the most visible impact is the explosion of access roads and pipeline right-of-ways criss-crossing the forested hillsides. Drilling isn't just about well pad activity; gas companies rely on a massive road system to bring machinery, rig parts and water to the site. They rely on pipelines for getting their gas to market. And each of those road cuts and right-of-ways slices the forest into smaller and smaller fragments.

New Yorkers who want to see what the future holds for their forests need look only as far as Allegheny National Forest, which lies just across the border from NY Allegany State Park. Drilling is not new there, Belitskus said, noting that the United States Forest Service (USFS) estimates 12,000 to 15,000 shallow gas wells have been drilled within the forest boundaries.

Marcellus wells are more industrialized, and Belitskus is concerned that the larger pads and wider roads, built to accommodate heavier trucks, will only exacerbate the fragmentation. “They say they'll need fewer well pads because the units will be larger,” he said. “But they often drill 8 to 12 wells on a pad.” These pads, Belitskus said, are about five acres. “Add to that a 10-acre fresh-water impoundment and a one-to-two acre frack pit, land for the access roads, and you're looking at closer to 20 acres.”

The gas industry projected 30,000 new wells in Pennsylvania by 2020, Belitskus said. He compared drilling to coal mining, noting the disruption on the landscape will be significant and long term.

“Right now they're drilling anchor wells,” Belitskus said. This is when a company drills a single well on a unit and then packs up their gear and heads to another unit to drill a well. The strategy, he explained, is to get a hole in the ground and then hold the leases “by production” until they can get back to complete their drilling. And that might take ten years, Belitskus said. The companies don't have to do any remediation until they finish drilling activities.

One problem Belitskus pointed out is that although wells in PA require permits, they don't require environmental assessments. Even without Marcellus drilling, the forest

service has documented a decline in wildlife species in Allegheny National Forest: populations of Northern Goshawk, Red-shouldered hawk, Great blue heron, wood and box turtles and timber rattlers have declined. So has the Cerulean warbler, a species dependent on older, unfragmented forests.

Just as important are the water issues. Sedimentation, from road and well pad construction, affects water quality, particularly in trout streams. Katy Dunlap explained that high levels of dissolved solids, combined with low stream flow and hot weather, produced deadly algae blooms in one Pennsylvania creek, resulting in a fish kill.

Inadequate oversight of water withdrawals is another issue both Dunlap and Belitskus touched on. Companies aren't required to obtain permits outside of the Susquehanna and Delaware River Basins, although they may be required to report how much water they pump out of streams and lakes. The result, says Belitskus, is streams pumped dry and truckers hauling water from one basin to another.

Hikers and campers heading to the hills to escape summer heat or the rat-race of city life may find their weekend of peace and quiet disrupted by traffic to nearby wells. Or, like some folks, come upon well pad construction in the middle of their trail.

Pennsylvania has 18 state forest trails and three national "scenic" trails that are protected from drilling, says Shellie Northrup. The protection she refers to is a requirement for 100 to 200 feet of buffer between the trails and drilling activities.

The problem, Northrup said, is less popular and more remote trails are not protected. Hikers report coming across flaring wells, piles of tree trunks blocking trails, and well pads that obliterate paths. Furthermore, Northrup says that state foresters have the power to waive buffer requirements.

"Getting places is going to take more time," Northrup said, noting heavy truck traffic on windy roads. Also, multi-use trails and logging roads may be closed as companies set up for gas development. So hikers should always call the forest district to find out about trail access, Northrup said.