

Frack Attack

Michael Brune, Huffington Post, 8-12-10

Fracking. It's a word you probably hadn't heard a year or two ago. This week the Environmental Protection Agency had to postpone a public hearing on the subject in Syracuse, New York, because of concerns that the venue might not be able to accommodate the 8,000 or more citizens expected to show up and voice their passions on the subject.

I've been in New York and Pennsylvania in recent days, and I know how important this issue is to people in these states and others that sit on what's known as the Marcellus Shale -- a geological formation that stretches north from West Virginia. In total, this shale contains what may be the biggest natural-gas deposit in the world. To extract the gas, companies first drill deep wells and then use a technique called hydraulic fracturing -- "fracking" for short. It's a process that injects, under high pressure, huge amounts of water laced with sand and more than a hundred chemicals into rock formations deep under the ground.

Chemicals and water -- there's your first clue to why people are alarmed. A report released by the Pennsylvania Land Trust this month showed that there have been 1,435 violations of the state oil and gas laws in the past 2.5 years -- at least 952 of which affect the environment. That's more than one a day.

The tiny town of Dimock, Pennsylvania, has more than 60 wells in a nine-square-mile area. Fourteen families have had their drinking water contaminated with methane gas after drilling on or near their property. They'll probably never be able to drink the water from their wells again.

Methane in your tap water is both creepy and dangerous. YouTube clips of people lighting the water from their faucets on fire are bad enough. But a couple of weeks ago, a man in Pennsylvania was severely burned after his well exploded while he was setting up a waterslide in his yard for his kids.

There's a drilling boom sweeping across the Marcellus Shale region, and the gas companies are out of control. If we can't protect our communities and treasured landscapes, then we should not drill for natural gas.

I am cautiously hopeful, however, that strong regulation and government oversight will make drilling safe, because we sure could use the help of natural gas as we push quickly and aggressively toward a truly clean energy future powered by wind, solar, and other renewable resources.

In 2005, the Sierra Club's staff and volunteer leaders agreed climate change should be our highest priority. And stopping climate change requires that we transition from the dirtiest energy sources (coal and oil) to the cleanest. Natural gas, while decidedly imperfect, burns more cleanly than other fossil fuels and, thanks in part to the Marcellus Shale, it's abundant.

But when I said that the gas companies are "out of control," I meant it literally. If there's one lesson we all learned from what happened in the Gulf of Mexico this year, it's that energy companies have to be regulated. There's just too much money at stake for them to be trusted to do the right thing on their own.

Thanks to the Bush/Cheney Energy Task Force, however, fracking is specifically exempt from federal regulation under the Safe Drinking Water Act -- what's known as "the Halliburton Loophole." Oh, and by the way, Halliburton, is one of three biggest suppliers of hydraulic-fracturing technology.

Some moves in the right direction are already being made. The New York State Senate just passed a moratorium on natural-gas drilling until next May to give its Department of Environmental Conservation time to finish new permitting guidelines. And the EPA has begun a two-year, \$1.9 million safety review of hydraulic fracturing that could ultimately result in a reversal of the federal government's abdication of oversight over one of our most important energy resources.

But it's not enough. The gas companies are operating with the arrogance of the pre-Gulf BP. They won't disclose the names and concentrations of the chemicals they're injecting into the water table. And they flat out refuse to admit that fracking is dangerous or that drilling should be regulated.

The Sierra Club won't stand for reckless drilling anywhere, whether it's the Marcellus Shale or the Gulf of Mexico. Already, the Hydrofracking Team is one of the most active on the Club's Activist Network. I encourage you to check out the work they're doing, along with the Pennsylvania Chapter and the Atlantic Chapter.

We need to reach a clean-energy future, but let's do it without destroying communities and ecosystems along the way.