

Fracked To Pieces

Concerned Citizen Groups Call for a Ban as New York State Draws Closer to Wide-scale Hydraulic Fracturing

A house next door to a hydraulic fracturing site in Washington County, Pennsylvania. (© Marcellus Protest Photostream)



In anticipation of hydraulic fracturing or “fracking” for natural gas coming to New York’s Catskill region, Jill Wiener made an unexpected career move. An artist who relocated from New York City to the Catskill town of Callicoon 15 years ago, Wiener is so upset about the proposed gas drilling that she’s running for office on a platform opposing it. She moved to the area, she explains, after discovering the perfect homestead there. “I live in the country on 60 acres with a beautiful spring-fed pond. I’m a potter. I grow chemical-free flowers. I depend on my clean water for everything. It [fracking] is not proven to be safe, and I’d never inflict this on the land I call home or on my neighbors or community. We have people running for office all over the shale. I’m running for town council because my councilman supports it. I didn’t want to do this — I wanted to sit in my barn and make pots.”

Drilling for domestic natural gas is one of the fastest growing sources of energy in the U.S. Based on all the industry media ads, natural gas looks like the un-fossil fossil fuel, the “safe, clean” source of energy for electricity, home heating and even for fueling a growing segment of the country’s transportation fleet.[...]

The biggest growth in production has come since 2004, as new technologies have allowed companies to drill wells horizontally into slick rock, a process that requires injection under high pressure of thousands of chemicals mixed with sand and hundreds of thousands to millions of gallons of water deep underground into hard rock shale formations to release the previously inaccessible natural gas within. Much of the criticism of the practice has focused on concerns about how fracking might contaminate drinking water wells. But a more fundamental problem may be that shale gas, which is predicted to grow from 15% of natural gas production in 2011 to almost half of production by 2030 according to the federal Energy Information Administration, is delaying and may even prevent the development of economically competitive clean, renewable energy. [...]

Local, regional and statewide groups have sprung up in New York to push for a permanent ban on shale drilling. Citing the injection of thousands of chemicals—some of which are carcinogens—and the pollution of up to a million gallons of fresh water each time a horizontal well is fracked, opponents say the process can’t possibly be kept clean or safe. The industry denies responsibility for drinking well contamination and points out that the EPA has acknowledged that so far it has not been able to link such contamination to fracking practices.

Potter/political candidate Wiener is part of Catskill Citizens for Safe Energy, which formed in 2008 “in a reaction to landmen coming around asking people to sign leases,” she explains. “There’s a very vocal minority of people that are for this; they’re supported by industry so their voices become louder.” An August 2011 Quinnipiac University statewide poll showed New York voters favor drilling the Marcellus Shale by up to a 47% margin for the jobs and taxes it would generate, even though a majority of them say they believe it will damage the environment. Meanwhile, the New York State-based Marist Poll queried residents the same month and found that 37% of New Yorkers oppose drilling, while 32% support it and 31% are unsure. Local polls in some Catskill region towns run as high as 80% against drilling.

In grassroots fashion, the 7,000-member Citizens for Safe Energy has no office, but its leaders “meet” online several times a day. “People are very frustrated on both sides of the issue,” Wiener says. “I sympathize with large landowners and dairy farmers who have been put upon by government-controlled milk prices and then somebody comes in and promises Christmas and you don’t have to do anything and you can continue farming. But people are getting sold a bill of goods. This is a gigantic environmental, public health and economic problem—it would completely change our economy. It is also a giant social problem. Communities are coming apart at the seams, neighbor against neighbor, and family members on either side of the issue. Thanksgiving dinners are not what they used to be.”

Wiener points to Louisiana as a cautionary tale. Although tourism, seafood harvesting and gas and oil extraction have co-existed there for years, drilling in the Gulf contributes to major erosion of the coastline and everyday spills along with spectacular disasters like the BP explosion in 2010. These substantially impact the other two major economic drivers, although industry promoters emphasize the resilience of ecosystems in their ability to recover from such assaults.

“The same thing will hold true here,” Wiener says. “Our biggest industries are tourism and agriculture. If we have drill rigs everywhere and possible contamination, I don’t know too many tourists that would come up here, battling thousands of diesel trucks.” She notes that Brooklyn’s Park Slope Food Coop came out in support of a moratorium and declared it wouldn’t buy any food produced where fracking occurs.[...] (882 words)

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MELINDA TUHUS is an independent print and radio journalist who has worked with *In These Times*, *The New York Times*, *Free Speech Radio News* and public radio stations.

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