

The Ithaca JOURNAL

December 23, 2009

New York City says Catskill gas drilling risks are too great

By Mary Esch
The Associated Press

ALBANY -- New York City's Department of Environmental Protection called on state officials Wednesday to ban natural gas drilling in the Catskills watershed, saying it would pose too great a risk to the city's upstate drinking water system.

The DEP took that position in response to the state Department of Environmental Conservation's draft regulations on gas drilling in New York's portion of the Marcellus Shale region, which includes parts of the Catskills where reservoirs supply drinking water for 9 million people.

The state is taking public comments on its 800-plus page draft until Dec. 31. The city DEP had withheld comment pending its own lengthy review of the potential risks of gas exploration using hydraulic fracturing, which blasts millions of gallons of chemical-laced water deep into the shale to release trapped gas.

Chesapeake Energy, one of the nation's largest natural gas producers, and the only leaseholder in the watershed region, has said it won't drill there because of opposition from politicians and environmental groups. But opponents have continued to call for a ban, saying the company's word isn't good enough.

"Based on the latest science and available technology, as well as the data and limited analysis presented by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, high-volume hydrofracking and horizontal drilling pose unacceptable threats to the unfiltered fresh water supply of 9 million New Yorkers," acting DEP Commissioner Steven Lawitts said in a prepared statement.

The city has a waiver from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that allows it to draw water from its upstate reservoirs without filtration. The city has spent about \$1.5 billion to protect the water supply since 1997 and says it would cost at least \$10 billion to build a filtration plant if the water supply were to become contaminated.

The Marcellus Shale formation runs through parts of West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. It underlies about 18,700 square miles in southern New York, including the city's entire 1,585-square-mile watershed west of the Hudson River.

The risks cited by the DEP's consulting team include:

- * The infrastructure needed to support as many as 3,000 to 6,000 wells would result in millions of truck trips, thousands of acres of site clearing and grading, millions of tons of fracking chemicals, and millions of tons of contaminated wastewater.
- * Chemicals injected into deep rock formations can travel for miles along underground fissures to groundwater and ultimately streams that feed reservoirs.
- * High-volume hydraulic fracking could damage the city's water supply infrastructure, especially underground water tunnels.

The city also faults the state's document for not analyzing cumulative impacts of the industrial development necessary for drilling and not sufficiently addressing public health concerns.

"We appreciate the input from NYCDEP," said DEC spokesman Yancey Roy. "At this time we are still taking input from the public, and it would not be appropriate to respond to specific comments."

Landowner groups hoping to make millions of dollars from gas leases were frustrated with the city's call for further delays or a ban on drilling. Gas exploration in New York's part of the Marcellus Shale has been on hold for more than a year while the state drafted the new regulations.

Dan Fitzsimmons, leader of a Binghamton-area landowner coalition, pointed out the economic benefits of natural gas production such as low natural gas prices and energized trading on Wall Street. He said the state's regulatory proposal provides adequate safeguards.

"It's really frustrating," he said. "They haven't done their homework in New York City."

Advocates on the other side of the polarizing issue were delighted.

"This is a stupendous development," said Walter Hang, an advocate from Ithaca organizing a movement to stop drilling under the current DEC proposal. "It shows the city is going to do everything it can to protect their reservoirs."

With Bloomberg and the DEP behind it, he added, "it amps up the pressure for the governor to withdraw the draft."
