

Where Do We Go From Here?

Part 2

The Marcellus Shale Play in North central Pa

In the first piece I wrote perhaps 9 months ago, I mentioned that my family is involved in the gas leasing as well as the economy of this new gas era. I also mentioned that we came here around 33 years ago and raised our children in this rural, healthy environment. It was all about quality of life. It still is. It has worked up to this point, but we are at a cross-roads now...all of us.

As most of you already are aware, things have changed quite a bit just in those 9 months. Well pads are appearing in many parts of the county. Our roads in some cases are being heavily impacted and the truck traffic on many roads has dramatically increased. Some of our towns have changed noticeably. Some of this has been positive with the injection of huge amounts of capital into certain segments of our economy...especially among our rural, large land owners, and in many businesses. Many bonus checks have already been paid and apparently some wells and royalties are flowing. Employment is up in some parts of our economy. Overall...so far...most of the disruption is somewhat temporary. Good...right? Yes...as far as it goes.

Have you seen the heading in the most recent Time Magazine concerning the Gulf Oil Spill? It read: "A Combination of Industry Recklessness and Regulatory Failure Led to the Gulf of Mexico Catastrophe. It Will Happen Again Unless Washington, Business, and the Rest of Us Change." This same statement could be said of Tioga County and what we are approaching in the Marcellus Shale Play.

If you wonder how I've come to that conclusion, I would refer you to the June 21st edition of The Nation. If you do not have access to the magazine in hard copy, you can Google it easily. Go to page 18. The article is called "The Next Drilling Disaster", and is about the Marcellus Shale Play in Dimock, PA in Susquehanna County. Really, it is also about all of PA and what has already occurred in the Dimock area and what could occur if we have a similar scenario as in the Gulf.

This article begins with an interview with a local resident in Dimock named Victoria Switzer whose land was affected. In her words, "It hasn't just transformed Dimock into an industrial hub; it has also damaged the local water supply and put resident's health at risk. After a stray drill bit banged four wells in 2008, weird things started happening to people's water. Some flushed black, some orange, some turned bubbly. One well exploded, the result of methane migration, and residents say elevated metal and toluene levels have ruined twelve other wells. Then, in September 2009, about 8000 gallons of hazardous drilling fluids spilled into nearby fields and creeks."

"Some fear that Dimock is the first natural gas casualty, an early warning of what could happen on a much larger scale if fracking spreads unchecked to other areas."

Further along in the article it states that "in the 1990s, first in Texas and later in other Western States, new drilling techniques, sophisticated technology and industrial exemptions from environmental laws paved the way for economically viable fracking. Many of those exemptions, from provisions in the **Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Super Fund Act, and the Resources Conservation Recovery Act** are long standing."

“The most obvious of these was introduced by Vice President Dick Cheney as an amendment to the 2005 energy bill. This was the Halliburton Loophole named after Cheney’s former employer and the company that pioneered the fracking process in the 1940s. This stripped the EPA’s authority to regulate hydrofracking through the Safe Water Drinking Act. Companies were essentially given free rein to drill however and wherever they see fit, and to use and dispose of proprietary fracking fluids without any disclosure or safety regs.”

The Nation article goes into the many fracking chemicals that have adverse health effects and PA’s lack of ability (both of legal powers and employee training and numbers) to regulate these chemicals and their uses.

Pa legislator Senator Casey says, “Natural gas drilling in Marcellus Shale in Pa has the potential to be a great economic boon for the Commonwealth, but we must take the proper steps to make sure it is done in a way that benefits Pennsylvanians and protects drinking water. PA can reap the benefits and not be left with the burden on our infrastructure, health, and safety.” I sincerely hope he is right as I do not believe this state is going to put the pause button on (as in a temporary Moratorium) as New York State did.

Again, as I wrote in the first article on this in both the Wellsboro Gazette and the Harrisburg Patriot (see H.P news January 21st, 2010); our response must be bi-partisan. We must get these exemptions to our environmental laws struck down immediately as well as sufficient taxation on the entire process to finance the level of government oversight to insure that we survive this in a decent way. This is no time for either political party to be playing political games. This affects all of us.

Kerry Gyekis

Note: I will be writing more about this in other venues here and elsewhere. I would appreciate any information you come by whether it is positive or negative concerning the process, etc., especially if it can be verified. I will try to present a balanced picture, and I need your help. You can reach me at: Gyekis@epix.net.