

Environmentalists on fracking

Sharon Abercrombie | Sep. 27, 2011 Eco Catholic

Fracking, a relatively new drilling technology for bringing up natural gas from the earth, does not encourage feelings of neutrality.

People either hate or love the idea of this quick fix method for extracting unenvironmentally sustainable fossil fuels from the ground. Fracking has been banned by the French Assembly and the state of New Jersey. The government of South Africa has extended a moratorium on it for another six months.

Pennsylvania is another story entirely. Many residents there are alarmed by the plot line.

It goes like this: Fracking is one of the leading characters in this northeastern state's energy plans for the future.

Drilling permits have gone from 99 in 2007 to 2,108 in 2010, said Sr. Mary Elizabeth Clark, director of the St. Joseph Sisters' Earth Center at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia.

Short-hand for hydraulic fracturing, fracking injects millions of gallons of pressurized water, chemicals and sand into the earth to loosen shale to release natural gas.

Holy Cross Br. David Andrews, a senior representative at Food and Water Watch in Washington, D.C. wrote June 9 in *NCR* that headaches, dizziness, endocrine disruption, cancer, memory loss, and complaints about gastrointestinal problems have been among the illnesses resulting from contact with fracking's contaminated water.

Iris Marie Bloom, founding director of Protecting Our Waters, a grass-roots environmental organization in Philadelphia, organized a rally, "Shale Gas Outrage," last week on Sept. 7 to call for a state-wide moratorium on drilling in Pennsylvania and to intensify the demand for a continued moratorium in the Delaware River Basin.

This basin is part of the Marcellus Shale formation, which extends through parts of several states around Pennsylvania.

On her Web site, Protecting Our Waters, Bloom argues that the "Marcellus Shale formation is full of salt, heavy metals like arsenic and barium, and is extremely radioactive with samples showing Radium 226 at hundreds of times the level safe for release to the environment and thousands of times the level safe for drinking water. Thus, every single frack of an unconventional well brings back to the surface dangerous contaminants along with toxic chemicals, which there is currently no way to safely treat."

Much of the agitation among the several hundred activists at the Shale Gas Outrage was directed towards the Delaware River Basin Commission.

The commission has scheduled a special two-hour meeting for Oct. 21 to consider the adoption of regulations allowing natural gas drilling to go forward. Drilling has been on hold in some northeastern Pennsylvania

counties until the commission adopts the regulations.

This, of course, is a major worry for committed environmentalists like Clark. She, too, supports a moratorium on drilling.

Last year, Clark testified before the Philadelphia City Council, urging members to "insist that the ethical standards of purification of our drinking water be enforced on any possible contaminants from the drilling. There ought to be a moratorium on drilling until it has been shown to be absolutely safe for the Delaware River, the source of our drinking water. This is only one of the issues that threaten our [p]lanet caused by the potential drilling. Another issue such as deforestation is also a major concern."

Clark also advised the council that ground water investigations by the Department of Environmental Protection in Pennsylvania "ought not to be funded by any money coming from vested interests in the profit of the drilling."

Since then, Earth Center's director has organized several showings of Josh Fox's award-winning documentary, "Gasland," at her school. It exposes major problems associated with fracking from Pennsylvania to Colorado.

Regarding the whole issue of gas extraction, Clark told Eco-Catholic that "we have to maintain a critical eye to see for the long term." She believes that Catholics are called "to do more advocacy on behalf of our Creation, to look beyond the apparent good of short term goals."

One drawback to the short term expediency route is "there just hasn't been enough caution on the part of the gas companies to protect the environment," she said

"Our right to life includes pure drinking water," she said.

Bloom predicts that drilling could affect the drinking water of more than 15 million people, including residents of Philadelphia, Princeton, Camden and New York City.

The moratorium that Bloom calls for would be in effect until:

- New Pennsylvania wastewater treatment requirements for shale gas drilling waste are in place and enforced.
- An Environmental Impact Statement has been completed for Pennsylvania.
- All federal exemptions for hydraulic fracturing are lifted from the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Clean Water Act, and Clean Air Act.
- The Environmental Protection Agency study is complete.
- And a fund has been created enabling landowners to perform baseline testing of private water wells.

Undoubtedly, the topic of fracking will come up next month, on Oct. 11 when Chestnut Hill College hosts its first annual conference for urban sustainability for colleges and universities in the Delaware River Basin.

Organized by Clark and the Chestnut Hill College Center for Environmental Science and Sustainability, the meeting will look at ways to deepen the commitment of schools to work for environmental good and to explore ways to network.

Sr. Miriam Therese MacGillis, co-founder of Genesis Farm, an ecological learning center in New Jersey, will be the keynote presenter.

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