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The Marcellus Watch



A Cornell engineering professor who has spent decades studying energy drilling techniques says it would be a mistake to open the door too soon for hydraulic fracturing in the Finger Lakes. In his latest column about drilling in the Marcellus Shale formation, Peter Mantius writes that Anthony Ingraffea is touring the region to raise key questions about the gas industry's PR campaign.

Left: Peter Mantius

What's the Rush?

By Peter Mantius

BURDETT, March 13 -- In a low-key road tour of citizen meetings around the Finger Lakes, a Cornell engineering professor is arguing that New York State must resist the temptation to open the floodgates for natural gas drilling.

The Finger Lakes region should “bank” the resource and tap it later, says Anthony R. Ingraffea.

We should wait to learn from the mistakes made in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, where drillers have plunged ahead, he adds.

In New York, a statewide moratorium has prevented a similar rush to drill -- so far.

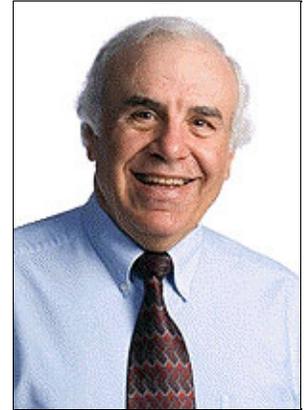
But the natural gas industry, along with many public officials and landowners in the Southern Tier, are pressing the state to end its ban on horizontal drilling and slick water hydraulic fracturing -- or hydrofracking -- in the Marcellus Shale, a stratum of rock rich in natural gas.

Political pressure to allow the controversial drilling technique is intense, and the state is likely to give the green light soon, despite mounting evidence that the process has plenty of nasty side effects.

For Ingraffea (*pictured at right*), the No. 1 problem is the industry's quandary about how to dispose of hydrofracking's enormous volume of hazardous wastewater.

"Where that stuff goes is my biggest question," Ingraffea says. "Pennsylvania and West Virginia haven't figured it out."

Ingraffea, a specialist in rock mechanics, knows his subject. He's worked as a principal investigator on research and development projects for, among others, Schlumberger, a worldwide drilling services company that's building a regional hydrofracking supply center in Horseheads.



He says he tries to translate his technical knowledge of gas drilling for fellow citizens who are trying to sort out fact from hype.

He is scheduled to speak Tuesday, March 16, at 7 p.m. at the Watkins Glen High School auditorium. The event is free and open to the public.

If the drilling moratorium is lifted this year, Ingraffea said Schuyler County should prepare to see drillers turn their attention to Seneca Lake.

Hydrofracking a gas well requires millions of gallons of water, and the most logical place to draw it is from the region's large lakes.

"There are going to be water withdrawal requests for Seneca," Ingraffea told citizens in Geneva recently. "That's inconsequential to the lake. But transporting that water is a big problem."

The lake will be replenished naturally with rain and runoff, so the lake's water level isn't a major concern. But residents of Schuyler County should brace themselves for a big jump in truck traffic as Seneca's water is hauled to wells for fracking.

Ingraffea sees another likely result of a drilling boom: further efforts by drillers to obtain regulatory clearance to dispose of fracking wastewater in "injection wells."

Between one quarter and one half of the water injected into wells in the fracking process returns to the surface as hazardous waste. It is typically extremely salty and contaminated with dissolved solids and, often, potentially dangerous levels of naturally occurring radioactive materials.

Municipal water treatment plants can't process it.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency regulates the disposal of wastewater in these abandoned wells.

Chesapeake Energy Corp., the nation's largest independent gas driller, recently sought permits to inject fracking wastewater into an old well in the Keuka Lake wine trail community of Pulteney, but withdrew its application last month after the proposal triggered an uprising by local citizens.

The protestors were concerned about potential wastewater spills, noise and truck traffic wrecking the ambiance of the scenic highway west of the lake.

The episode left bad blood between many Pulteney residents and the chairman of their town council, William Weber.

They say Weber, who acknowledged owning stock in Chesapeake and serving as building manager at the company's leased regional headquarters, negotiated in private with the company before letting other officials and citizens know a wastewater disposal plan was in the works.

To make matters worse, the wastewater was to be trucked to Pulteney from wells in Pennsylvania.

At a town meeting March 10, a group of Pulteney citizens presented Weber with a petition seeking his immediate resignation, and Dr. Ivan Szathmary stood to tell him: "I've known you for 24 years and have supported you. But now it's time to part company."

Weber declined to step down.

The episode shows how public officials, who may have conflicts of interest or appear to have conflicts in proposed gas drilling projects, may find themselves in a cross-fire between an industry eager to develop and local residents who are in opposition.

A number of public officials in the region already have leased land to gas companies, and any with significant land holdings could sign a lucrative gas lease in the future.

So officials will need to balance potential personal financial gain with their sworn obligation to operate on behalf of the general public good.

Meanwhile, the gas industry has been stepping up its public relations campaign effort to build broad public support for drilling.

A central tenet of that PR push is that Marcellus Shale gas in New York can contribute significantly to the nation's push for cleaner energy.

"That's BS," says Ingraffea. "The New York State supply is relatively small and should be banked as part of our national energy policy."

To achieve the levels of production the gas drilling promoters promise, he adds, would require extraordinarily dense drilling operations -- so dense that the Finger Lakes would become a virtual industrial zone.

He also dismisses the industry's claim that New York State has the nation's toughest drilling laws. If you believe that, he says, compare the 19 recent amendments that Pennsylvania has made to its rules in response to specific gas drilling problems and notice that New York's regulations don't measure up.

Why should citizens listen to him and not the gas industry's advertising campaign?

“Listen to both and make an educated decision,” Ingraffea says.

Peter Mantius (pmantius@gmail.com) was a financial, legal and political reporter at The Atlanta Constitution for 17 years and editor of two business weeklies in the Northeast.

Photo in text: Anthony R. Ingraffea, a professor of engineering at Cornell University, will speak at the Watkins Glen High School auditorium on Tuesday, March 16, at 7 p.m. (*Photo provided*)

***Note:** This is the eighth column by Peter Mantius, To see his first column, click [here](#). To see his second column, click [here](#). To see his third column, click [here](#). To see his fourth column, click [here](#). To see his fifth column, click [here](#). To see his sixth column, click [here](#). To see his seventh column, click [here](#).*

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