

HubbardTown Patriot

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Want Clean Water? Demand Non-Toxic Drilling Alternatives.

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

This past June, New York Assemblyman Felix Ortiz sponsored a bill that would prohibit the use of toxic “fracking” solutions during hydraulic fracturing to obtain gas from the Marcellus Shale. The bill (A11606) would amend the current environmental conservation law. Ortiz and the eight legislators who co-sponsored the bill are seeking ways to safeguard the health and safety of citizens, as well as maintain ecosystem health; while at the same time, allowing energy-exploration companies to extract mineral resources.

Their justification for the bill is based on data demonstrating that many of the substances currently used in hydraulic fracturing solutions are carcinogenic, and can cause mutations in both humans and animals. Fracking fluids currently incorporate diesel and other petroleum products such as benzene, toluene, and xylene.

Cancer is only one of the concerns; toluene also affects the nervous system. According to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), low-to-moderate levels of toluene can cause tiredness, confusion, weakness, drunken-type actions, memory loss, nausea, loss of appetite, and hearing and color-vision loss. High levels of toluene may cause liver and kidney damage.

Ortiz’s concern is that these chemicals, used in fracturing the shale to release gas, have the potential to pollute our drinking water.

Fortunately, there are non-toxic alternatives that are already used in the industry. Offshore drillers use a broad spectrum of fracking chemicals specifically developed to not harm ocean life. A quick internet search reveals a host of new patents for “non-toxic” fracking fluids. And this past summer, North Carolina State University hosted research opportunities for engineering students to develop a non-toxic fracturing fluid based on an aqueous solution of guar (a naturally occurring and abundant sugar).

Concern about groundwater, and maintaining our viability as an agricultural community, has come up at nearly every public meeting on oil and gas over the past few months. The recent meeting in Spencer served to underscore just how much the citizens in our communities are concerned about the issue of groundwater contamination. No one wants toxic chemicals leaching into their well water, ponds, and streams.

Those of us who choose to live here value the fields, forests, soils, and streams that make up our home. We hunt and fish; we bring in the harvest; we boast about the sweet taste of our well water. We want our children to return with their children and enjoy the same simple pleasures of country living that we value so highly.

But, if we want to keep the water pure and the soil fertile, we need to take action. On June 16, Assembly bill A11606 was referred to the committee on environmental conservation. On June 25, the Assembly adjourned for the summer, having taken no action.

It is true that the governor has declared that no horizontal drilling may occur in Marcellus Shale before the DEC completes their supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. It is also true that if we want to protect our valuable water resources, we need to act now. I urge each reader to take pen in hand and write a letter or send an e-mail to your Assembly person. You will find their addresses listed in each town section in this paper.

The Assembly is currently not in session, but that may change. On July 29, Governor Patterson said that he is calling the legislature back for an emergency economic session on Tuesday, August 19. Once the Assembly reconvenes, they may address other issues they deem pertinent. With the explosion in gas exploration, the Assembly may very well consider bills that protect our resources during energy exploration.

HubbardTown Patriot is a weekly opinion column shared by Candor residents Martha Goodsell and Sue Heavenrich. Online at www.hubbardtowntpatriot.com.