

Ithaca Firm Petitions Governor to Withdraw SGEIS

Wants adequate protection of water and other resources

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The December 31 deadline for comments on the draft Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement (SGEIS) has lots of people scrambling. In towns across this area board members and other municipal officials are busy reviewing drafts of the comments they'll be submitting to the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). These comments are substantial – comments sent from Tioga Investigates Natural Gas (TING) to town representatives fill 13 pages; Danby's draft runs about 20.

But there is a growing movement to call on Governor Paterson to withdraw the SGEIS and tell DEC to go back to the drawing board. Walter Hang of Toxics Targeting, Inc. in Ithaca is spearheading that movement and last week held a meeting to generate support for recalling the SGEIS. More than 100 people crowded into the meeting room at the Women's Community Building to hear about problems with the SGEIS and to brainstorm actions to halt its approval.

Every community has a legacy of toxic problems, Hang told the audience. "The important thing is that we don't add to it," he said. "The SGEIS is based on the fundamental assumption that the existing regulations are fine."

Those existing regulations are embodied within the DEC's 1992 GEIS. The problem, as Hang sees it, is that the current regulations fail to adequately safeguard citizens against impacts on water quality, land use, economic and cultural resources and wildlife.

Hang emphasized the industrial nature of drilling in the Marcellus. He flipped through a series of slides showing Marcellus well pad activity and listed some of the issues of concern. "Where will the wastewater go?" he asked. The public wastewater treatment plant at Cayuga Heights isn't equipped for the high levels of dissolved solids in the brines. Nor are public treatment plants set up to deal with the radioactivity expected to be in Marcellus brines, Hang added.

To test whether existing DEC oil and gas regulations were adequate, Hang reviewed 300,000 incidents of leaking tanks and spills – incidents recorded by and investigated by the DEC.

On November 20, 1996, drillers working on the Dale Fox well on Bixby Road in Freedom, NY hit a pocket of gas and oil. The gas, Hang said, escaped under such pressure that it shot out of the hole for an entire day. Gas also escaped through faults in the shale, migrating 8,000 feet in a matter of minutes and polluting wells, surface water and soil.

This incident polluted the drinking water for a dozen families, Hang said. Under current rules a gas well must be at least 150 feet from a drinking water well, 300 feet from a reservoir and 1,000 feet from a public water supply. Given that gas from a single accident migrated 8,000 feet, these current regulations are inadequate. Not only that, Hang said, thirteen years later the folks on Bixby Road still can't drink the water.

Many of the reports related brine spills. In 2006 DEC received a report about a brine spill in Independence. Due to a broken valve close to 100,000 gallons of brine solution poured onto the ground, and some of it ran into Shanada creek. The following year a spill of 15,000 gallons of brine spilled, again due to a valve failure, killing vegetation as it flowed into a stream. One landowner watered his cows at the river. The company's solution: fence off the river, provide water for the cows and leave the vegetation to "grow back next summer."

Hang identified a total of 270 oil and gas spills that caused fires and explosions, contaminated drinking water sources, tainted farmland and home evacuations. Many of them have yet to be cleaned up. "And they want to say this is adequate for shale gas," Hang said. Another problem, he noted, is the lack of inspectors; there are currently 17 people inspecting thousands of wells across the state.

"The bottom line," Hang said, "is that the government is not safeguarding your public health and safety."

That is why Hang's company is now circulating a petition that asks Governor Paterson to withdraw the SGEIS. That action will allow the "de-facto moratorium on drilling permits" to continue, Hang said, and allow towns and citizens more time to push for stronger environmental cleanup protections.

The original GEIS took 12 years to complete, Hang pointed out, so what's the rush now? "We're trying to thwart this tsunami of Marcellus drilling," he said and urged people to sign onto the letter to the Governor and gather more signatures for the petition. By last week nearly 2,000 people and organizations had signed the letter.

To learn more about Toxics Targeting, Inc., and Hang's work on Marcellus shale, go to <http://www.toxicstargeting.com/MarcellusShale>. You will find the letter as well as interactive maps and the profile of oil and gas spills. You can also access the information through Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Ithaca-NY/Toxics-Targeting/95035142437>.