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## Balancing natural resources

### DEC says it will safeguard environment in quest for gas

*By Peter Grannis*

Across New York's Southern Tier and Catskill foothills, there is talk about a modern-day gold rush for natural gas. Drillers are hurrying to lease rights from New Yorkers to tap into the Marcellus Shale formation, a rich natural gas reserve that may contain trillions of cubic feet of natural gas worth a fortune.

While this exploration could increase supplies of natural gas, expand the tax base and boost the upstate economy, it can also have significant environmental impacts. In public forums already held across the state, Gov. David A. Paterson's administration has heard the community concerns, particularly about environmental protection.

The Department of Environmental Conservation shares those concerns and is fully committed to ensuring that this drilling will only proceed in an environmentally responsible way.

Gov. Paterson recently approved a bill that extends uniform gas well spacing rules and establishes boundary setbacks to protect the interests of adjacent property owners. This new law has been widely misreported as allowing a new type of drilling, or somehow making it easier to get the environmental permits necessary for drilling. In fact, the new law addresses only well spacing. It authorizes nothing new or in any way reduces the environmental review needed before a drilling permit is issued.

In signing the spacing bill, the governor directed DEC to supplement the existing generic environmental impact statement governing drilling to specifically address horizontal natural gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale. In plain terms, this will be an evaluation with full public participation -- including meetings across the Southern Tier -- that takes a comprehensive look at all the possible environmental consequences of the proposed drilling.

Oil and gas drilling in New York has been around since the 19th century and is an important industry, with hundreds of drilling permits issued every year. Because wells in New York are so tightly regulated, with a full complement of environmental protections, many people don't realize there are approximately 13,000 active oil and gas wells in the state.

DEC's Mineral Resources professional staff members, averaging 22 years' experience per person, review each drilling application for environmental compliance before any drilling is permitted, inspect actual drilling operations and enforce strict restoration rules when drilling is completed. As a result of New York's rigorous regulatory process, the types of problems that have occurred in states without such strong environmental laws and rigorous regulations haven't happened here.

When the drilling companies seeking to tap the Marcellus formation started approaching local landowners, DEC staff began a public outreach program, to provide information about leasing and the proposed drilling.

The technology proposed for Marcellus Shale drilling is called horizontal or directional drilling. This technology is not new to New York -- for many years we have had numerous horizontal wells

permitted in the state. What is new, however, is the scale of the proposed horizontal drilling in the Marcellus Shale, and this raises significant issues that will be addressed comprehensively and publicly as we supplement the generic environmental impact statement.

Before any permits are issued for horizontal wells in the Marcellus formation we will know what is going into and coming out of the ground. We will know how the large quantities of water needed for these operations will be managed and stored in order to protect our critical water resources. And we will know how any wastewater will be properly treated and disposed of.

The people of the Southern Tier and the Catskills love their land. Gov. Paterson and I understand and share their feelings. As we move forward to address the potential drilling in the Marcellus Shale, DEC will be there, working in partnership with local communities, to ensure that our precious land, air, water and natural resources are fully protected.

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