Industry, politicians push “hydrofracking” despite environmental threat

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The US energy industry is marshaling its financial and political muscle to overwhelm all opposition to the environmentally dangerous technique known as hydraulic fracturing, or “hydrofracking,” used in drilling for gas in the Marcellus Shale geologic formation of the eastern United States, extending from New York through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, West Virginia and beyond. Democratic and Republican politicians are willing participants in removing any obstacles to this highly profitable but environmentally disastrous method of gas extraction.

The hydrofracking process involves the injection of “fracking fluid,” consisting of water, sand, and a witch’s brew of chemicals, many highly toxic, deep below ground to fracture the shale bedrock and release the gas, which could not be effectively extracted by more conventional methods. The returning mixture of fluid and natural gas contains not only the original toxic materials, but also brings up radioactive elements embedded in the shale. The result is contamination not only of local groundwater, as evidenced by polluted individual household wells, some of which have emitted inflammable fluids, but the much larger issue of contamination of regional river systems caused by the dumping of untreated or partially treated wastewater.

The extraction of natural gas, along with domestic oil, “clean coal,” and a renewed development of nuclear energy, was highlighted as part of the policy for US “energy independence” in President Obama’s recent State of the Union address. The huge amounts of gas that can be obtained from shale deposits in various parts of the country by the use of hydrofracking is touted as making the US the “Saudi Arabia” of natural gas. Consequently, hydrofracking is being forcefully promoted by both industry and the political establishment.

In addition, with severe budget deficits in the Northeast and Middle Atlantic regions, where the Marcellus Shale and the potentially even larger underlying Utica Shale are located, many state politicians see gas extraction as a significant source of new revenue. Others, including the governor of Pennsylvania, oppose any restraint on the energy companies’ ability to maximize profits. In state after state politicians are taking actions that are blatantly promoting the interests of the energy industry while sweeping away all concerns regarding the consequences to public health and the environment.

Evidence of the severe dangers posed by this process is accumulating, despite the efforts of industry and politicians to suppress or distort it. Disposal of the rapidly growing quantities of used fracking fluid has become a major point of controversy. In Pennsylvania, which has in the last few years become the “wild west” of the hydrofracking boom (the number of new gas wells has nearly doubled from 2009 to 2010), it is increasingly evident that, despite all assurances to the contrary, contamination of the environment, and in particular of drinking water, by the disposal of waste fluid is growing at an alarming rate.

A large proportion of these fluids is being dumped into the environment with minimal or no treatment. Often, what “treatment” there is involves little more than dilution or processing at municipal wastewater treatment plants not designed to deal with the exotic chemicals, let alone the radioactive materials, contained in the wastewater. The “treated” wastewater is then flushed into nearby waterways.

The industry is claiming that a growing proportion of the hundreds of millions of gallons of wastewater being generated annually in Pennsylvania is being “recycled.” However, as reported in the *New York Times*, less than half of the wastewater produced in the 18 months ending last December was recycled. Furthermore, many of the so-called recycling methods are questionable. For example, some wastewater from Pennsylvania is reportedly being sold to neighboring states for use as roadway deicer because of its high salt content or for use as a dust suppressor during the summer. The contaminants are then washed by rain and enter the groundwater. In one example reported by the *Times*, “More than 155,000 gallons of this wastewater was sent by a drilling company called Ultra Resources to nine towns [in West Virginia] for dust suppression in 2009, state records show. The water came from two gas wells in Tioga County [Pennsylvania] and contained radium at almost 700 times the levels allowed in drinking water.” The industry classifies this as recycling.

Another recycling method involves the re-use of waste fluid in subsequent hydrofracking operations after some dilution. However, the fluid becomes even more contaminated with each use, thus compounding the problem of ultimate disposal.

The *New York Times* reports that hydraulic fracturing wastewater at 116 of 179 deep gas wells tested in Pennsylvania contained high levels of radioactive materials. The state Department of Environmental Protection recently conducted tests of a number of rivers and streams that receive fracking effluent. The results supposedly showed no more than permitted amounts of radioactive materials. The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has, however, criticized this study for inadequate sampling and recommended further testing.

Other tests have revealed elevated levels of bromides in western Pennsylvania river water. According to an article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the spike in bromide salts in rivers receiving fracking wastewater has already put some public water providers in violation of federal safe drinking water standards. These salts are toxic and, when put through typical municipal wastewater treatment processing, create products that have been linked to cancer and birth defects. Millions of gallons of “treated” fracking wastewater are dumped into the Ohio River and its tributaries every day. The spike in bromide levels has coincided with the dramatic increase in hydrofracking activities over the last few years in this region. This problem will grow astronomically over the coming years. According to the *New York Times*, “At least 50,000 new Marcellus wells are supposed to be drilled in Pennsylvania over the next two decades, up from about 6,400 permitted now.”

One method of wastewater disposal that has been promoted as a “permanent” solution is injection deep underground. However, the Associated Press reports that operations at injection wells in central

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Arkansas were recently suspended due to a suspected association with an unusually high frequency of earthquakes, more than 800 in the last six months, including the strongest in the last 35 years. The quake activity has apparently begun to decline following the suspension.

The uncontrolled spread of fracking activities poses other threats as well. Drilling often takes place in isolated, rural areas with no effective supervision, and there is every incentive to cut as many corners as possible. The likely result is exemplified by a recent explosion of storage tanks at a gas well in rural Washington County, Pennsylvania. The fire took three hours to extinguish. Three workers were hospitalized for burn injuries. When multiplied by the tens of thousands of such wells that are likely to be drilled, the scale of the danger becomes evident.

The magnitude of hydrofracking's impact was emphasized by a recent announcement by Statoil ASA, a Norwegian company partnering with Chesapeake Energy, that it could drill as many as 17,000 natural gas wells in the Marcellus shale field over the next 20 years. According to the Associated Press, this agreement covers a total 1.8 million acres and more than 32,000 leases in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York and Ohio.

Despite the clear evidence of of hydrofracking's dangerous consequences, the gas industry is both promoted and protected by the political establishment. "Natural gas drilling companies have major exemptions from parts of at least 7 of the 15 sweeping federal environmental laws that regulate most other heavy industries and were written to protect air and drinking water from radioactive and hazardous chemicals," the *New York Times* noted. The conspiracy between energy companies and the government took a major step forward during the George W. Bush presidency when, under the influence of Vice President Dick Cheney, who once headed Halliburton, the company that helped invent hydrofracking and is a supplier of fracking fluid, the process was exempted from the provisions of the Safe Drinking Water Act.

At the federal level, efforts by scientists at the EPA to study the consequences of hydrofracking have been repeatedly suppressed due to industry pressure, according to the *Times*. Evidence gathered by the *Times* indicates that such pressure is again being exerted on the current hydrofracking study being carried out by the EPA, a study not due for publication until 2014.

Weak federal regulation has opened the door for the industry and collaborating politicians to mount a state by state campaign to ensure the unbridled proliferation of drilling activities.

In Pennsylvania, newly-elected Governor Tom Corbett is proposing to give authority over critical environmental decisions to an energy industry executive, C. Alan Walker, who has contributed $184,000 to the governor's political campaigns since 2004. Corbett appointed Walker to head the Department of Community and Economic Development [DCED]. A report by ProPublica states that, "as Corbett stakes much of the state's economy on Marcellus Shale gas drilling, a paragraph tucked into the 1,184-page budget gives Walker unprecedented authority to 'expedite any permit or action pending in any agency where the creation of jobs may be impacted.' That includes, presumably, coal, oil, gas and trucking."

This is, in effect, the creation of dictatorial power to sweep away any regulation, including those pertaining to environmental protection and public health and safety, that stands in the way of maximizing corporate profits. Environmental groups have protested that the governor is exceeding his authority in granting such wide-ranging power to overrule other government agencies and regulations.

"The budget introduced today represents a completely new way of doing business for DCED and its economic development partners," Walker stated. "In a tough economic climate, we need to send a powerful message to the Pennsylvania Business Community that Pennsylvania is open for business."

Concurrently with the placement of an unabashed representative of the energy industry in a key government position, Corbett's budget proposal includes a cut of nearly 20 percent in funding for the Department of Environmental Protection, inevitably crippling its ability to carry out any regulatory functions, including oversight of hydraulic fracturing. In furtherance of granting unfettered access to the gas drillers, Governor Corbett recently fulfilled a campaign promise and rescinded what had been a de facto ban on drilling in state forest land. The Pennsylvania House recently voted down a proposal to have trucks hauling hydrofracking wastewater labeled as carrying hazardous waste and to have the drivers receive special training.

Similar moves to allow gas drillers free rein are being made throughout the region.

Ohio's right-wing Governor John Kasich has voiced his support for permitting hydraulic fracturing in parks and other state-owned property. Kasich made clear his support for gas and oil drilling in his budget proposal. A bill introduced in the legislature to allow drilling on state land would create a five-member oversight board, consisting of two industry representatives and three individuals appointed by the governor.

New York State's temporary moratorium on hydrofracking is set to expire this June, when the results of a state-level review by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) are due to be released. The new DEC commissioner, Joe Martens, appointed by Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, has already made clear his bias toward business. He has stated, "I intend to make sure that the DEC is responsive to business and that we work together to avoid regulatory stalemate." Whatever official regulatory scheme may emerge from the current review, the ability of DEC to provide enforcement has been severely hampered by recent extensive layoffs and retirements prompted by the state's massive budget deficit, not to mention the effects of the 10 percent cuts to agencies in Governor Cuomo's proposed new budget.

As the ongoing nuclear catastrophe in Japan and last year's BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, have so starkly demonstrated, capitalism's insatiable drive for profit combined with nation-state rivalries over energy resources repeatedly produces the most tragic consequences for humans and the environment. The accelerating use of hydrofracking has the potential of creating a similar catastrophe

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