

March 29, 2010**EDITORIAL**

Finding Natural Gas, Safely

The Environmental Protection Agency will soon begin a much-needed study of the effects on water quality and public health of a method of extracting natural gas called hydraulic fracturing. An E.P.A. investigation in 2004 was rightly seen as superficial and skewed toward industry, which provided much of the underlying data. This one must be comprehensive and transparent.

It must also be swift. The search for natural gas has widened beyond the usual venues like Texas and the Rocky Mountain West to Pennsylvania and New York State, site of a vast deposit called the Marcellus Shale.

Hydraulic fracturing involves blasting water, sand and chemicals into underground formations to unlock the gas. The technique has been implicated in a growing number of water pollution cases. New York State has been forced to review plans to allow exploratory drilling upstate, including New York City's watershed, because of fears that an accidental release of toxic chemicals could poison the water supply for millions of people.

Representative Maurice Hinchey, a Democrat from New York, had inserted a provision in a spending bill urging the E.P.A to undertake the study. Mr. Hinchey is also the co-author, with Diana DeGette, a Colorado Democrat, of a bill that would force industry to disclose the chemicals it uses and require regulation of the process under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Industry has publicly endorsed the E.P.A. review and expressed confidence that it will show that hydraulic fracturing is, in the words of the American Petroleum Institute, a "safe and well-understood technology" that has allowed access to huge new supplies of natural gas.

At the same time, industry opposes the DeGette-Hinchey bill, claiming that the chemicals it uses are proprietary secrets and that new regulations would deter production. Mr. Hinchey and Ms. DeGette should stick to their guns. It's important to enlarge the nation's supply of natural gas, a relatively clean fuel. But where public health is an issue, federal oversight is plainly required.

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