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## Questions About Fracturing

The Environmental Protection Agency is about to begin a much-needed study of the health and environmental effects of extracting natural gas through hydraulic fracturing. The issue isn't whether the country should keep drilling for natural gas, which is vital to our energy future. It is whether it can be done this way safely.

A 2004 E.P.A. study of hydraulic fracturing was rightly criticized as superficial and skewed toward industry. The new investigation, authorized by Congress, must be thorough and transparent, with extensive visits to areas where critics say the process is polluting water supplies.

Hydraulic fracturing involves blasting underground rock with a high-pressure mixture of water, sand and chemicals. It has been used in more than 90 percent of 450,000 operating natural gas wells, mostly without incident. But environmental concerns have risen about huge deposits in miles below the earth's surface, which would require more water and chemicals, increasing the risks.

Among the largest and deepest deposits is the Marcellus Shale, which stretches from West Virginia through Pennsylvania into New York's Southern Tier, and embraces the million-acre watershed that supplies New York City with unfiltered drinking water. New drilling in New York has been on hold pending the completion of environmental reviews later this year. In Pennsylvania, drilling is under way. Residents have complained about foul-smelling well water, deformed fish and itchy skin.

We have long believed that carefully regulated drilling in the Marcellus Shale might be feasible, but the state should put the city's watershed permanently off limits. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the City Council share this view. There are simply too many points in the drilling process where toxic chemicals could escape.

Nationwide, hydraulic fracturing has been implicated in dozens of water pollution cases, but much of the evidence is anecdotal. The E.P.A.'s job is to figure out the risks, order changes in

drilling practices where necessary and develop federal regulations to replace the present state-by-state patchwork of laws.

The drilling industry says its technology is fundamentally sound. BP said pretty much the same thing. We need more credible assurances this time.