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EDITORIAL

Hands Off the Watershed

New York City has now officially registered its ringing opposition to a proposal by state regulators to allow natural gas drilling in the watershed that supplies drinking water to more than eight million city residents. Albany should amend its proposal and put the area permanently off limits to drilling.

The watershed covers roughly a million acres of farms, forests, lakes and streams northwest of the city. Its subsurface rock formations contain rich deposits of natural gas and are part of a much larger geologic formation known as the Marcellus Shale, which runs northward from West Virginia into New York's southern tier.

The state wants to exploit this resource because it could add to the region's energy supplies and give a much-needed lift to the upstate economy. But the watershed contains just one-tenth of the state's known gas deposits. That means New York would not be giving up all that much if it does the right thing and bans drilling there.

Last fall, Albany issued a thick set of rules intended to regulate drilling. Environmentalists and city officials immediately cautioned that while carefully regulated drilling could proceed in other parts of the state with minimal environmental damage, it would be foolish to risk the city's water supply.

A new report commissioned by the city, and written by scientists and engineers who specialize in gas drilling, confirms those fears. It says that the drilling process — which is done by injecting water and chemicals at high pressure into the rock formations — “creates a substantial risk of chemical contamination and infrastructure damage.” That, in turn, could force the city to build a \$10 billion filtration plant and negate the sizable investment it has already made to keep the watershed clean. Mayor Michael Bloomberg is to be commended for commissioning the report and demanding a quick turnaround.

The good news is that the Chesapeake Energy Corporation, believed to be the largest leaseholder in the watershed, has already announced that it will not drill there. But its decision is voluntary and not binding on other companies. The only sure way to guarantee the protection of the watershed, and New York City's supply of drinking water, is to quarantine the area.

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