

Fracking could ruin state's economy



Lucian Lytel, 8, of Cooperstown, holds a sign he made for the anti-fracking rally, which he attended with his parents and three siblings in Albany Monday, APRIL 11, 2011. / Cara Matthews/The Journal News/Cara Matthews

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Re “Shale gas is an investment in state’s future,” Dec. 3 Community View:

The above-referenced article by Ross Pepe, president of the Construction Council, contains statements whose accuracy we question. Although we agree on the important need to maintain the state’s infrastructure, rendered more difficult because of the stagnant economy, we disagree that “... there is a potential economic miracle for our state — right below us in Marcellus shale.”

The writer estimates that natural gas development “will generate over \$11.4 billion in economic output statewide, creating up to 18,000 jobs” over the next 20 years. Although the author does not disclose the source of this optimistic forecast, and other studies present a far less optimistic picture — even accepting these figures only discloses a small portion of the overall picture. Not taken into account are the serious negative impacts to the economy and the environment, both of which are inseparably linked.

If high-volume hydraulic fracturing or “fracking” in New York’s Marcellus/Utica shale were permitted, the results would be devastating to the region’s economy. This is a region that is largely forested and agricultural. Its forests provide tourism that includes hunting and fishing, wood products and, most important, clean air and clean water — free of cost. Agriculture provides dairy products, a large variety of fruits and vegetables and a growing wine industry.

Hazard to agriculture

A study issued in March 2010 by the State Comptroller's Office notes that agriculture is among New York's largest and most vital industries. In 2007, according to the study, the income generated directly by farms, combined with income generated by agricultural support industries and by industries that process agricultural products, totaled \$31.2 billion. New York's forests generate approximately \$9 billion in economic activity on an annual basis. In addition, the study found, "over \$13 billion is generated by over 55 million annual visitors to the NY State Park System, together with sales of equipment and services."

Fracking is a heavily industrialized process that requires many hundreds of heavy diesel trucks bringing millions of gallons of water, chemicals and equipment to the well-pad where drilling takes place. Up to 10 wells can be drilled from a single five-acre well-pad, and up to 160 wells total are allowed within a square-mile drilling unit.

Among the hundreds of possible chemicals that can be added to the water and that are injected into the wellbore to "frack" the well under high pressure are several that are carcinogens and/or endocrine disrupters. Some remain trade secrets, despite the possibility that they could contaminate drinking water. Up to 80 percent of the injected water may be left underground in order to avoid disposal problems. Whether it will eventually migrate into the area's aquifers is anybody's guess. The "flowback" water accumulated from this process, kept in open, plastic-lined pits, is vulnerable to overflow into nearby streams, lakes and wetlands during storm events. This water contains a variety of heavy metals, high density of salts, and radioactive materials that are found at dangerously high levels in New York's shale. How to safely dispose of this toxic material is still an open question. Fracking is clearly incompatible with existing use of the land.

No sure thing

The state Department of Environmental Conservation, in its Draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement, has not provided any figures to prove that fracking will help bring jobs and prosperity to New York. On the contrary, the DEC admits the following: "Given the large uncertainties associated with the future natural gas market, the economic and demographic disparities between different parts of New York State, and other unknown factors that would influence the development of the natural gas reserves in low-permeability shale in the state, specific economic forecasts have not been developed for this report. Instead, a range of potential economic impacts have been identified and analyzed."

In a case such as this, it would be wise to apply the Precautionary Principle. Rather than destroy the state's sustainable agricultural/forestry industries and products with a speculative boom/bust industry such as fracking, a more intelligent course would be to encourage and improve what has been proven

viable. We know that many upstate farms, despite the hard work of their owners, have difficulty in surviving. New York should devise a strategy to help its important farm industry remain viable, and continue to supply us with healthy food products.

It is ironic that at the moment, there is a surplus of natural gas in the U.S., resulting in several companies planning to transform their liquified natural gas import terminals to export terminals. Among them is Dominion Resources Inc., which is well-positioned to export New York's shale gas to foreign countries. Undoubtedly, the higher prices from exporting liquified natural gas will help raise prices here, in the U.S. Any financial benefit that might come from fracking will most likely be negated.

If New York is to avoid becoming a colony of the gas companies, it should wean itself from its dependence on natural gas and other carbon-derived energy producers. Instead, the state should use its extraordinary advantages — human, technical, and land — to become this nation's innovator and leader in smart energy conservation, and in developing clean, renewable and sustainable energy sources such as wind and solar. And let us make sure that our political leaders fully understand the need to abandon fracking as an energy source, and to create jobs and a healthy economy and environment, without destroying our land, air and water.

The writer is director, Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition Inc., a not-for-profit membership organization that works to protect drinking water resources in New York. It is composed of more than 50 member organizations.