

## **Board Last Defense On Drilling**

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By Kim Sandum

ROCKINGHAM COUNTY SUPERVISORS wisely avoided a quick decision on the Bergton natural gas mining application. Supervisor Pablo Cuevas pledged no action on the proposal until the county “has all the information to consider,” including potential impacts on water quality and public health.

So it was surprising to read David Banks’ dismissal of any concerns about the impacts of natural gas drilling (“Drilling A Resource, Not A Risk,” April 8). Mr. Banks declared that hydraulic fracturing, the type of gas drilling requested in Rockingham, “has never resulted in any confirmed cases of groundwater contamination.” It is not surprising that Mr. Banks is a senior adviser to the American Petroleum Institute and a public relations firm representing gas and oil industries.

A simple Internet search refutes Mr. Banks’ statement. Dozens of scientific journal reports, news stories and policy papers have been published detailing incidents of water contamination from natural gas drilling in Marcellus Shale deposits in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and other states.

In particular, Scientific American, an objective mainstream source of science news, recently published a series of articles documenting harmful impacts from the drilling process that would be used in Bergton. An article published March 30 states: “Leaks from badly cased wells contaminated drinking water wells, and one even exploded” in Dimock, Pa.

In Dish, Texas, a town at the center of a natural gas drilling boom, the pollutant benzene, a known cancer-causing agent, “was present at levels as much as 55 times higher than allowed by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality,” the Scientific American article states.

Newspaper accounts document other water impacts: fish kills in a tributary to the Monongahela River in West Virginia, cattle dying from drinking water next to a hydrofractured gas well in Louisiana and numerous well and home explosions.

Proponents of natural gas mining have long cited the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s determination in 2004 that hydrofracturing posed no risks to drinking water. Congress subsequently passed an exemption from regulations under the federal Safe Water Drinking Act for this type of natural gas mining.

But in the wake of mounting evidence of drinking water well contamination and other harmful consequences, the EPA reversed course. Last month, the agency announced plans for a national study of hydrofracturing's adverse impacts on water quality and public health. The EPA also launched a natural gas drilling hotline, to provide a formal channel to report water quality problems.

Without federal guidelines, states have been left to develop natural gas drilling regulations on their own. Pennsylvania and West Virginia took a "drill first, ask questions later" approach and water quality complaints abound. These states are now addressing the unexpected problems with new regulations. New York stopped new permits until the state develops appropriate regulations. Virginia does not have regulations specific to hydrofracturing Marcellus Shale.

So we are left at a tremendous disadvantage in Rockingham County. The Bergton application is the first of its kind in the Commonwealth. With insufficient federal or state oversight, the entire burden to protect local water quality and public health falls on our Rockingham County supervisors.

The board's cautious approach is the right one, in the best interest of all Rockingham County residents.

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