

The Fracking Dilemma

Drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus shale formation is one of the most widely-discussed and hotly-debated energy issues today. If you live outside Pennsylvania or New York, you may wonder what the controversy is about, considering that oil and natural gas development has been taking place in the Mid-Atlantic region for over a hundred years.

There are many factors driving the current shale boom, including new technology that has dramatically changed the scale of gas extraction. In only the last ten years or so, a technique known as high-volume, slick-water, horizontal hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking” has become cost-effective at retrieving natural gas from depths as far as 10,000 feet below the surface. Fracking is a part of the drilling process, whereby 5-7 million gallons of pressurized water combined with sand and chemicals is pumped into a well that has already been drilled. The fracking process breaks apart the shale, freeing gas from many tiny pockets deep underground.

Coupled with the increased costs of other energy sources and the conversion of many power plants to burn natural gas instead of coal, the extraction of natural gas from deep below the surface has been estimated to provide decades of supply. This change in market conditions and the introduction of new technology has driven the recent boom in gas drilling, especially in Pennsylvania, where less than one-hundred new wells were drilled in the Marcellus shale formation in 2007, compared with over 3,300 wells drilled in subsequent years.

Proponents say this development creates jobs and serves as a bridge to cleaner energy alternatives. The use of natural gas for home heating and commercial power generation does reduce local air quality impacts, compared to wood, oil or coal. However, hydraulic fracturing and other aspects of commercial drilling pose serious threats to our environment including air and water contamination, noise pollution, deforestation, and habitat fragmentation. Current regulations on natural gas drilling do not fully address these concerns, for example, the industry is exempted from the section of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act that would require them to report the chemicals used in fracking a well. And drilling regulations on the state level, which are based not on the traditional form of gas drilling, are too inadequate to address the unique problems associated with this relatively new technology.

AMC's commitment to conservation includes an obligation to evaluate and address these concerns, especially where they affect public lands and waters. In Pennsylvania, over half of the state parks lie within the borders of the Marcellus Shale, and over one third of the state forest has been leased for drilling already. Our first priority is to protect these lands from adverse effects of natural gas development. These spectacular public places need our protection if they are to continue providing the beauty, respite and recreational opportunities that they provide today. One way that AMC is protecting these lands is by telling the stories of outdoor recreationists like you who value public parks in the Marcellus Shale region of Pennsylvania. We need your stories so that we can show others what's at risk and demonstrate the need to better protect public lands and waters. If you have a story you would like to contribute, please email Cathy Frankenberg, AMC's Mid-Atlantic Policy Associate, at cfrankenberg@outdoors.org.

To learn more about our natural gas policy, go to <http://www.outdoors.org/conservation/issues/natural-gas.cfm>