

Fracking - Biggest Threat to Michigan's Water, by Anne Zukowski

Horizontal fracking to extract deep shale methane gas poses a huge threat to Michigan's fresh water. Although vertical fracking into the relatively shallow Antrim shale has been used in Michigan for years, the new horizontal, hydraulic fracking uses vast quantities of water and toxic chemicals to reach deep remote gas reserves, and is significantly riskier and more dangerous. In every state where it has been used, horizontal fracking has caused serious damage to drinking water, freshwater aquifers, rivers, streams, human health, livestock, wildlife and air quality. It turns rural areas into industrial wastelands with clear cutting, 24-hour truck traffic, noise and air pollution.

The reason horizontal fracking has become possible and profitable is because gas companies are exempted from water withdrawal rules and from environmental laws such as the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act and the Superfund Act. An amendment to the 2005 energy bill, called the Halliburton Loophole, actually stripped the EPA's authority to regulate hydrofracking through the Safe Drinking Water Act. Companies are not required to disclose the contents of the chemicals used in the fracking process, and even receive government subsidies to drill. Given such an unequal playing field, it is no wonder why green, renewable technologies such as wind, solar and geothermal, are unable to compete.

The DEQ website claims that "Michigan's laws and rules effectively protect water and other natural resources as well as public health and safety from the potential adverse effects of hydraulic fracking." Actions, however, speak louder than words. The Missaukee County Pioneer well used 5.5 million gallons of groundwater to frack their well. This withdrawal greatly exceeded the extraction limits of the Michigan Great Lakes Preservation Act. Encana, the Canadian company that drilled the well got a waiver, because gas companies are exempt from Michigan water withdrawal rules. Another well, Mancelona 1-28 HD, failed the water withdrawal assessment tool two times this year because their water withdrawal request would negatively impact a cold-water transitional river system. Atlas Energy Company simply called on the DEQ for an on-site assessment. The permit was approved. Field notes obtained by a FOIA request in June stated, "We reviewed the proposed withdrawal listed above and found that it is not likely to cause an Adverse Resource impact." No facts or reasoning were given to support this decision. Atlas Energy has five other permit requests pending for gas wells in that same area. And what happens when hundreds or thousands of wells are drilled, (as is happening in other states), each one using and contaminating millions of gallons of fresh water? The rapid withdrawal and contamination of such enormous amounts of water depletes groundwater, affecting streams, homeowner water wells and irrigation for farming. In Texas, aquifers are drying up and farmers and ranchers are being forced to compete with gas companies for dwindling water supplies. In an era of diminishing freshwater supplies worldwide and throughout the U.S., this seems suicidal. We are being forced to trade clean water for energy. We should not have to make that choice.

We cannot depend upon the regulatory agencies to protect our water. And we cannot depend on stricter regulations to solve the problem, as is called for by some environmental groups and government agencies. Even if no accidents occur, the process itself is devastating. Regulations will not stop the enormous squandering of freshwater which is removed forever from the hydrologic cycle. Regulations will not eliminate the need for injection wells for disposal of the millions and millions of gallons of contaminated water and chemicals. (See Dr. Chris Groebbel's paper on injection wells, FOJ website.)

Horizontal fracking has been banned in Quebec and in France. The New Jersey legislature voted for a ban. A moratorium in New York recently expired and public opposition to fracking has been huge. New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman filed suit against federal agencies because they failed to fully look into potential environmental effects of drilling in the Delaware River Basin. According to Schneiderman, “The welfare of those living near the Delaware River Basin, as well as the millions of New Yorkers who rely on its pure drinking water each day, will not be ignored.” Fracking has been banned in over 30 municipalities around the country including Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and most recently, Detroit.

FOJ is working with the group Don’t Frack Michigan calling for a statewide ban on this destructive practice. Over a thousand people have signed their petition calling for a ban. The group has also written letters to the editor of area newspapers, done radio interviews, met with legislators and held public meetings. The DFM website includes links to scientific studies and investigative reports (including several in-depth articles in the New York Times.) A series of videos by Dr. Tony Ingraffea, Cornell University rock fracture specialist, describe in detail the fracking process and dangers involved.

Friends of the Jordan board members voted to work to ban fracking in the Jordan River Watershed. We plan to attend county and township meetings and approach the Natural Resource Commission to secure a ban in our watershed. Anyone interested in helping with this effort can contact us at www.friendsofthejordan.org. We urge other river and environmental groups to do the same in their watersheds. Similar efforts to ban fracking on a township and city level are occurring statewide. We also urge FOJ members to sign the petition by going to www.DontFrackMichigan.org, write to your legislators and help hand out brochures to friends, neighbors, church groups, etc.

Horizontal fracking poses a huge threat to the environment, public health and the economy. Help us stop this dangerous and unsustainable practice.