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Group wants drilling ban along Delaware River



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BY STEVE MCCONNELL (STAFF WRITER) / PUBLISHED: MARCH 12, 2011

A council of governments along the Delaware River in Northeast Pennsylvania is calling for a natural gas drilling ban near the waterway that is part of the U.S. National Park system because of the sheer "size and scope of today's natural gas development" and the possibility of the "industrialization" of the watershed.

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Members of the Upper Delaware Council, which is charged with protecting the beginning 73-mile stretch of the waterway dividing New York and Pennsylvania, are urging the Delaware River Basin Commission to restrict gas drilling in a wide swath around the National Wild and Scenic River because the drilling represents "heavy industrial" activity and therefore is "incompatible," according to a letter submitted to the federal-state environmental regulator this month.

"There shouldn't be anything in the river corridor as far as heavy industrial use," council Chairwoman Dolores A. Keesler said Friday, citing a management plan developed by them in 1986 that strove to protect its natural, recreational and scenic characteristics.

"That's the whole purpose of it," Ms. Keesler said.



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The extent of the restriction was described as "ridge top to ridge top," a distance of anywhere from approximately a half-mile to a mile and did not define a specific measure.

Formed in 1988, the council includes Berlin and Damascus townships in Wayne County; and Lackawaxen, Shohola and Westfall townships in Pike County, along with several communities in New York state.

The council also raised concerns about the prospect of thousands of natural gas wells being drilled in the Delaware River watershed, saying it "could have a profound effect on the environment" and "that it is not a question of if, but when, detectable changes" in water quality will occur.

The Delaware River, which provides drinking water to an estimated 15 million residents including in Philadelphia, has been a focal point in a battle among environmentalists opposed to drilling and landowners in favor of it.

The area is starkly different from the rest of the state in terms of natural gas development because it is under the jurisdiction of the Delaware River Basin Commission, which is developing its own gas drilling regulations and has also enacted a sweeping ban on production wells while this process is under way.

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Cardiac catheterization internist Morgan Hanadel, left, prepares for a procedure Tuesday in the Commonwealth Health Regional Hospital catheterization lab with cardiologist Dr. Nishant Sethi, center, and cardiovascular technician Nora Chan. (read more)

Police charge 10 in NY-NEPA drug ring

The commission regulates water quantity and quality issues in the Delaware River Basin, a 13,539-square-mile watershed that encompasses Wayne, Pike and Monroe counties and slivers of Lackawanna and Luzerne.

Some gas advocates have called for the abolition of the agency's reach into Northeast Pennsylvania claiming that it merely duplicates the regulatory protections offered by the state Department of Environmental Protection.

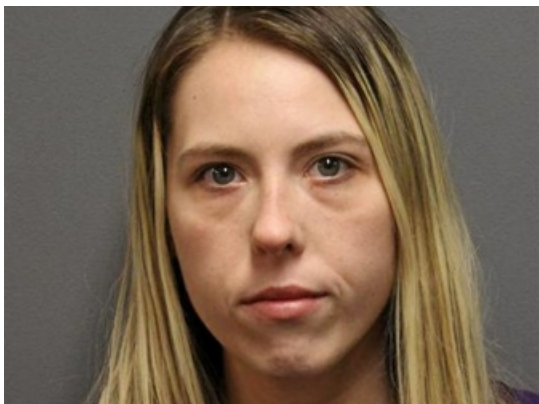
Peter Wynne, a spokesman for the Northern Wayne Property Owners Alliance, which has leased tens of thousands of acres in the watershed and near the Upper Delaware River for gas development, said it is understandable drilling should not happen in the floodplain, but anything beyond that is "absurd." "We don't necessarily agree with their aesthetic," meaning appearance of gas wells along the river, said Mr. Wynne. "They can claim it is important, and we can claim it isn't."

"They're attempting to dictate their taste to supersede legal (property and mineral) rights," he added.

Commission spokesman Clarke Rupert said draft natural gas regulations released in December provide for a 500 foot setback from any water body and prohibit drilling in floodplains.

"Some thought they (the regulations) were too restrictive; others thought they were not restrictive enough," Mr. Rupert said. "All of these varied points of view ... will have to be sorted through and considered."

Contact the writer: smconnell@ timeshamrock.com



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