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Landowners join together to prepare for hydrofracking

At issue: Properties in Oneida and Madison counties

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Landowners representing more than 10,000 acres in Oneida and Madison counties have formed a partnership with a goal of allowing hydraulic fracturing to safely occur on their property.

Their land includes sections of Oneida County south of Route 5 — property in municipalities such as New Hartford, Paris, Marshall, Sangerfield, Vernon, Vernon Center and Augusta, said Brymer Humphreys, the administrator of the group.

Humphreys, a New Hartford farmer and town Planning Board member, said the landowners in the partnership are in favor of hydraulic fracturing, but they want to contract with a natural gas company that will work with them to address issues such as whether well water would be impacted.

“We believe it’s something that’s going to happen in New York, and we want to have the best control of how it’s done as we can,” Humphreys said of hydrofracking. “We’re concerned about being able to get a reliable company — have some inspections of their proceedings and have them provide outlines as far as what they have to do to protect us as landowners and our neighbors.”

Opponents of hydrofracking, however, say there is no way to guarantee it can be done safely. Issues have been raised with potential effects such as decreased property values, polluted drinking water and damaged roads from the heavy traffic involved with the drilling.

A statewide moratorium on hydrofracking is in place until at least July 1, but the state Department of Environmental Conservation review process will take longer than that to complete, DEC spokesman Michael Bopp said. No hydrofracking permits will be issued in the state until the DEC study process is done, he said.

High-volume, horizontal hydrofracking involves mixing chemicals with millions of gallons of water and pumping the mixture into wells to create fractures in rock formations to allow natural gas to be harvested.

Southern Oneida County is located above part of the Marcellus Shale, a large rock formation under the surface of the earth that has been targeted for hydrofracking in New York and other states such as Pennsylvania.

The part of the county south of Route 5 also is above the Utica Shale, which has the potential for natural gas but has not been tested for hydrofracking, said Jeff Miller, an educator at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County.

The partnership

The landowners’ group, which is called the Pine Energy Madison and Oneida Partnership, has contracted with a company called Pine Energy Management, which will represent the landowners in negotiations with natural gas drilling companies, Humphreys said.

Most people in the partnership have wells, so they’re concerned too about whether there would be effects on water and the environment, Humphreys said. That’s part of the reason for forming the group, he said.

No natural gas companies have directly approached residents in Oneida County about leases, but landowners — such as those who have signed on with Pine Energy Management — have been talking with go-between people who would help them with signing a lease, Miller said.

By forming a larger group of landowners in Oneida and Madison counties, the partnership will have greater negotiating power with natural gas companies, said Mark Wagner, the co-owner of Pine Energy Management.

The company is based in Colorado and is planning on opening an office in the Oneida-Vernon area, said Wagner, who is a petroleum engineer with 31 years of experience in the industry.

The goal is to allow the industry to move into the area for drilling, but to do so in a way that landowners are comfortable with, Wagner said. The company will help in negotiations, develop drilling plans, make sure concerns such as water and road-use are addressed and provide oversight of the drilling, he said.

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“We work at the pleasure of the landowners – not the energy companies,” Wagner said.

Carleton Corey, owner of The Mum Farm on Red Hill Road in New Hartford, has concerns about hydrofracking — including whether water would be impacted.

He’s glad the landowners are working together because if they’re going to allow the practice, they should at least make sure it’s done right, he said.

So much contradictory information exists that he thinks landowners should get their water tested now, so they can measure if there are changes if drilling begins, he said.

“I don’t quite know what to believe,” he said.

Preparing and learning

The town of New Hartford has been looking into the issue of hydrofracking and is in the process of developing legislation for ordinances to regulate the practice, town Supervisor Patrick Tyksinski said.

If the town decides to allow hydrofracking, very strict rules would have to be put in place, he said. Tyksinski would consider instituting a town moratorium on hydrofracking until the issue is further reviewed, he said.

Tyksinski isn’t yet sure whether he is for or against hydrofracking, but he does have concerns about whether the drilling would affect water supplies and the potential for the drills to be abandoned if the practice becomes no longer profitable, he said. Those issues will be considered as the town develops its ordinances, he said.

“We don’t want polluted water up here in the town of New Hartford,” he said. “I don’t think any community does.”

When the state moratorium ends, the focus likely will be on parts of the state south of Oneida County because there are more expansive areas located above the Marcellus Shale, said Miller, of Cornell Cooperative Extension.

“I’m not sure we’re going to be a hotbed for activity, which is a good thing,” Miller said, adding that the county can watch what happens in other locations first. “So that we can learn from them.”

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Accidents happen.. fact. The gas companies can not guarantee that gas drilling with high volume hydro fracturing will be done safely. The best laid plans can have 'glitches,' there will always be some unforeseen problem. Just in the news recently from PA, a gas company 'lost control' of it's drilling operation and produced or 'frack' water was spilled into a nearby stream, by a company that has drilled many wells.. Do we want to take the chance of irreversably damaging our aquifers, at what price? What will you do with out clean drinking water? How long can you go without water? Water sustains all life. Not everyone will reap the so called financial benefits of this intrusive industry, but we all will realize the adverse environmental impacts this intrusive industry has a documented history of. It sounds like a conflict of interest to me for one to be a member of a town planning board and a farmer who is a large landowner and is also administrator for this 'partnership group.' If you are opposed to this intrusive industry, now is the time to let your town, county and state officials know. I do not think we should allow natural gas drilling through what I believe is a water source of exceptional value, high quality with pristine streams and waterways that should be maintained and protected. All water sources should be held sacred. Period.
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