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Groups Urge River Basin Commission: “Don’t Drill the Delaware”

More than 35,000 comments tell DRBC to extend moratorium and protect the Delaware from gas drilling

[West Trenton, NJ] – Today, groups representing residents of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York and Delaware gathered to deliver a record-breaking number of public comments to the Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC), urging them not to move ahead with gas drilling in the River Basin until such drilling is proven safe. The groups expressed strong concern that DRBC proposed rules without first conducting a cumulative impact study.

The groups delivered more than 35,000 public comments from four states, including from public health professionals and academics, in advance of the April 15th deadline, breaking the record for the most number of comments ever delivered to DRBC, and demonstrating extreme public concern over gas drilling’s impacts on the Delaware River and its surrounding watershed. More than 15 million people rely on water from the Delaware River for drinking and other everyday uses.

“It’s clear today, with more than 35,000 comments submitted, that the public is demanding protection to their health, environment and drinking water from dangerous gas drilling that’s been proposed near the Delaware River,” **said Erika Staaf of PennEnvironment.** “Considering the gas industry’s track record of pollution in Pennsylvania, the DRBC should heed the cries of these residents and extend the moratorium on gas drilling that has so far protected the Delaware and its inhabitants from this hazardous practice.”

“Never before have so many stood up to demand action by the Delaware River Basin Commission, **said Maya van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper.** “This unprecedented and overwhelming demand for protection from the DRBC demonstrates just what a major threat gas drilling is to our region and should put the Governors on notice that if they don’t ensure the DRBC protects the public, instead of continuing to act as servants for the gas drillers, the public will hold them accountable.”

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Deep-well horizontal hydraulic fracturing, often called “hydrofracking” or “fracking,” is the process used to extract gas from the Marcellus Shale and has shown to pose significant risks to public health and the environment at every stage of the process, from the risk of blowouts to air pollution and surface and groundwater contamination. Since 2004, companies have drilled more than 4,300 hydraulic fracturing wells in Pennsylvania and the state has issued permits for thousands more. New York could also expect hydrofracking to begin soon. Incidents and accidents that damage the environment and put public health at risk have already occurred:

- In September 2009, Cabot Oil and Gas caused three spills in Dimock Township, Pennsylvania, in less than a week, dumping 8,000 gallons of fracturing fluid components into Stevens Creek and a nearby wetland.
- A 2010 EOG well blowout in Clearfield County spilled 35,000 gallons of wastewater, some of which reached the Little Laurel Run, a stream that feeds the Susquehanna River.
- The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection recorded more than 1,000 violations of regulations intended to protect water quality at gas drilling sites between 2008 and August 2010.

"The rush to drill Marcellus Shale is a false bonanza -- it's a boom for natural gas drillers who want to drill first and ask questions later, and it's a bust for the rest of us," **said Doug O'Malley of Environment New Jersey**. "Hydrofracking is the biggest risk to face the Delaware in its history, and New Jersey's residents have everything to lose. This record number of comments should send a strong message to the DRBC not to give a green light to fracking."

The groups today expressed outrage over the DRBC's proposal to allow hydrofracking to begin in the Delaware watershed, putting an end to the existing moratorium on any drilling watershed. The groups' specific concerns centered on the speed at which the rules were proposed, the lack of a cumulative impact study, and the extent to which the rules rely on state regulations, which are either inadequate or non-existent.

"There are far too many red flags already showing that horizontal hydrofracking hurts human health, **said Iris Marie Bloom of Protecting Our Waters**. "Homes have blown up due to methane migration in Bradford Township, and dozens of families in Bradford County, Dimock, Hickory and elsewhere in Pennsylvania cannot drink their well water. Rural Pennsylvanians report human health impacts from nausea to skin lesions and respiratory distress; farmers report sick and dead animals. How many red flags do we need to show this process poisons life?"

Specifically, the coalition expressed concerns that the rules do not restrict the use of toxic chemicals drillers use while drilling and fracking in the watershed, regulate how to dispose of toxic drilling wastewater, prevent drilling and associated development and waste pits near the river and streams – which could occur as close as 500 feet, and do not stop the forested upper Delaware from becoming a devastated industrial landscape.

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“The regulations proposed by the DRBC offer little protection to the river, the residents of the basin or the more than 15 million people who rely on it for their drinking water,” **said Jill Wiener of Catskill Citizens for Safe Energy.** “The DRBC’s ultimate mission is to protect the river basin, but the proposed regulations stand in stark contrast to this mission. If drilling is to commence in the basin, there will be measurable change to the quality of the water. We can expect harm and degradation.”

“Currently the regulations permit the companies to police themselves when it comes to the handling of hazardous, toxic wastewater,” said **David Braun, organizer for United for Action.** “Already the Associated Press has reported that whole truck trips of this toxic wastewater have been disappearing in Pennsylvania in the hands of the drillers. Establishing this regulation is like allowing the foxes to guard the hen house.”

The DRBC is an interstate agency responsible for protecting the water resources of the Delaware River Basin – which includes parts of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware – with a mandate to maintain the high existing water quality so that there is “no measurable change” except towards natural conditions. This requires strict regulation of any activity that would degrade the river’s exceptional quality, including natural gas development that has the potential to pollute and diminish the water resources of the Basin and the water supply for more than 15 million people.

“We are urging President Obama, through his representative on the commission, to keep the moratorium on drilling in place in the Delaware River Basin and to call for preserving the Delaware, a national treasure and the source of drinking water for five percent of the country. Fuel production is not 'clean' when it damages our water, air and eco-systems,” said **Karina Wilkinson, Regional Organizer for Food & Water Watch, a national consumer advocacy group.**

“One of the most frightening aspects of shale gas production, yet also one of the least understood, is the long-term danger posed by leaving millions of gallons of toxic water underground at hundreds of thousands of wells around the country, with at least 18,000 sites projected in the Delaware River Basin alone,” said **Clifford Westfall, representing Damascus Citizens for Sustainability and NYH2O.**

“The sheer number of comments submitted to the DRBC demonstrates the public’s concern over the dangers hydraulic fracturing poses to the Delaware River,” said **Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.** “Given the millions of gallons of toxic chemicals to be pumped into the ground and the loss thousands of acres of forest, gas drilling will have a devastating impact on water quality and habitat. These rules fail to protect the drinking water for 15 million people.”

The Delaware River watershed, which extends through New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, supplies drinking water to more than 15 million people – over 5 percent of the U.S. population, – provides recreational opportunities and pumps millions of dollars into the region’s economy each year, and provides habitat for hundreds of critical wildlife species.

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