



Otsego County Soil & Water Conservation District

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On Natural Gas Exploration in Otsego County

In 1944, the Otsego County Board of Representatives passed resolution No. 8 and created the County's Conservation District, tasking the office with protecting the County's soil and water. Later, in 1979, the Board passed another resolution (No.112) naming the District as lead agency in planning, managing and implementing measures focused on reducing nonpoint source pollution in the County. Taken together, our office is responsible for protecting over 1,000 square miles of land, countless wetlands and pristine natural settings and hundreds of miles of road, stream, creek and river from a long list of natural and manmade threats.

In the time that has passed since those resolutions, the District has worked to address the erosion and runoff issues that stem from flooding, development, agriculture and stormwater management, just to name a few. For an agency much more accustomed to working on the County's farms, on its roads and highways, in its waters and with its students, having natural gas exploration turn up in our county the way it did has put us through a steep learning curve on a big and complicated issue.

For the past year or so now, the District has been watching the reaction to the purchase of gas leasing rights and the prospect of having the natural gas industry move into the southern tier and into our county's fields and forests. Along with everybody else, we learned about shale deposits, what hydro-fracturing is and about the industry's horizontal drilling process and all that it entails. To this day, we are still watching the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation come to grips with this type of gas exploration as their regulatory processes continue to unfold and develop. And, along with other municipalities across the region, we learned quickly what the limits of our jurisdiction and influence are.

For certain, local natural gas exploration is a broad and controversial topic with good arguments and strong feelings on both sides. Also certain, is how squarely the potential impacts to the County's natural environment fit within our mission to protect and conserve. Realizing early that this is an entirely new area for the District, we have tried to identify areas where we have expertise and can address some of the concerns that have been raised locally. We also realized quickly that the one thing the issue has not brought to the county is funds with which to prepare itself. Even so, if natural gas exploration and exploitation are in our future, either slowly or quickly, then now is a good time to start getting ready.

For the District, this means moving away from the continuing debate over the size and seriousness of the threat the gas industry poses to our environment and beginning to focus on actions we can take and have a positive impact: detecting water contamination, reacting to chronic and acute accidental spills and reducing construction stormwater runoff.

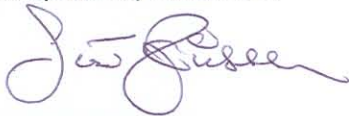
For the first, detecting water contamination, the District will work towards *developing a water quality sampling strategy* that will be adequate to detect contamination within its boundaries, should it occur, and provide the proper documentation. Sampling sites will include surface waterbodies, public drinking sources and private wells. Providing a sample will be voluntary and may include a cost. Developing a strategy like this faces several significant challenges, not the least of which is determining exactly what you're looking for, where and when. And, once these hurdles have been cleared, are the challenges of providing the technical expertise needed to collect, store, ship and analyze samples and the huge hurdle of finding the funds to make it happen.

On accidental spills, we're not in such uncharted territory. As you might expect, there are already agencies well versed and trained on how to deal with industrial waste spills. However, the District believes that time and resources spent on gaining acceptance from those involved on a plan that establishes the lines of communication, the roles of those involved and what actions can and should take place in the first critical hours, are time and resources well spent. So, as part of our efforts, the District will work with industry and the appropriate agencies to *develop a 'plan of action'* that will minimize risk to our environment and maximize the safety of the county's residents.

Sediment and erosion control on construction sites is much more familiar ground for the District. Enforcement of state regulations dealing with construction runoff is still the sole the jurisdiction of the DEC but Conservation Districts have a long history of performing site visits and providing landowners with the appropriate assistance to make sure that the soil loss and water quality impairments are avoided. Unfortunately, the agreements that existed between the Districts and the State to provide funding to accomplish these goals went un-renewed last year. Nevertheless, we will attempt to *engage the state, landowners and the industry to make sure that this easily solved type of pollution is being addressed adequately, and, where it is not, do all that we can to assist.* The District will also *provide services to local municipalities* who find themselves having to undergo infrastructure improvements and deal with the erosion issues.

In all of this, it is important not to raise expectations too high. Success in these efforts is far from guaranteed; in addition to the many challenges outlined above, is the Districts inability to contribute what will surely be a considerable amount of time and resources to this effort and, in this, we will need help. What is guaranteed though is our dedication to our County's soil and water resources and our best efforts to protect them within practical limitations in which we work.

Respectfully submitted,



Scott Fickbohm
District Manager