

Experiences with Natural Gas Extraction:
Interviews with Health Officials in New York's Counties

Ron Bishop

Chautauqua County Department of Health
Environmental Health Division
7 North Erie Street
Hall R. Clothier Building
Mayville, NY 14757

March 20, 2009

Bill Boria, Water Quality Specialist: 716-753-4481

Bill has been in this position for more than twenty-five years, and has seen the department evolve into a sophisticated water quality testing and management agency. They maintain systematic records of complaints related to natural gas development, which he offered in response to a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request. They have corresponded with the state DEC and with the US Geological Survey, and recently published a letter of recommendations for pre-testing water samples prior to local gas extraction activities.

He mentioned more than 120 complaints since record keeping began in late 1983, with seven recorded for 2008. In one instance (in Kiantone, May 2007), a well whose owners had done pre-testing was found significantly contaminated by a natural gas well 400 feet away – that was the most clear-cut impact of natural gas development to date. Bill mentioned that his department has a memorandum of understanding with the state DEC, Division of Mineral Resources, so any significant local events are automatically reported.

Mr. Boria responded to my FOIL request in just two days, with digital copies of their spreadsheet, correspondence with the USGS, and their letter of pre-testing recommendations.

Follow-up: Bill stripped the complaints spreadsheet of personal identifiers, but he may be open to providing names and contact information for a select few residents who have had problems with natural gas development.

Cattaraugus County Health Department
Historical Museum and Research Center
9824 Route 16
Machias, NY 14101

March 23, 2009

716-373-8050, ext. 6; I was transferred by Elaine to Chris Crawford, Water Quality Specialist

Chris has been in this position for about a year and a half; his voice sounded young. He mentioned that at the time of our call, there was a state conference for local environmental health officials at Vernon Downs focused on impacts of natural gas development.

In response to my question about their experience *vis á vis* natural gas extraction there, he first said that they hadn't had any real complaints. He went on to explain that his total capability for water testing was limited to nitrates and coliform bacteria; the county has no means of dealing with brines or volatile organic compounds (VOC's). Two or three people had called this year because of problems with nearby gas wells, and were advised to call someone who could actually help them. Their names and contact information were not recorded.

Follow-up: I'd like to speak with Eric Wohlers, Director of Environmental Health. In addition, the county historian (716-353-8200) might have some useful insights.

Allegany County Department of Health
County Office Building
7 Court Street
Belmont, NY 14813-1076

585-268-9250

March 24, 2009

I spoke with Richard Haywick (ext. 9251), water quality specialist. He told me they had had "no real problems" there.

Follow-up: I'd like to speak with Craig Braack, Historian: 585-268-9293.

Steuben County
3 East Pulteney Square
Bath, NY 14810

March 24, 2009

607-776-9631

Steuben County's health department has no environment division. Folks there can call the New York State Department of Health in Hornell: 607-324-8371.

Cayuga County Water Quality Management Agency
Department of Planning and Economic Development
160 Genesee Street
Auburn, NY 13021

March 24, 2009

Michele Wunderlich, Senior Planner: 315-253-1276

Michele spoke with me for a few minutes, making a point that the major water feature in Cayuga County is Cayuga Lake, overseen by a number of groups. She emphasized the agricultural nature of the county, in that contamination by natural gas developers has been less of a problem there than other aspects of industrial infrastructure, especially access roads which fragmented farm fields. She also mentioned issues they had not foreseen, such as vandals shooting at holding tanks full of hazardous waste fluids. She then transferred me to Bruce Natalie, Environmental Engineer with the Department of Health, Environmental Health Division (315-253-1405).

Bruce handles mineral resources and wells information. He made the point that the gas-bearing formations in Cayuga County are not like those around Otsego; they are closer to the surface and do not require stimulation by hydrofracturing. In addition, officials there have an ongoing issue with a chemicals plume from other industry in Auburn, which makes it difficult to assess new problems possibly related to natural gas extraction. At any rate, they have no records of clear-cut gas-related incidents in Cayuga County.

Follow-up: I wonder what was going on in Auburn to pollute the groundwater.

Seneca County Environmental Health Services
31 Thurber Drive
Waterloo, NY 13165

March 24, 2009

Vicki Swinehart, Director: 315-539-1925

Vickie referred me to Sara Brown Ryan, Principal Sanitarian: 315-539-1948

Sara had just returned from the Vernon Downs meeting on horizontal drilling / large volume hydrofracturing natural gas extraction. She was overflowing with information about the new technology, including an assertion by one of the presenting geologists to the effect that, "As long as you have a good operator in your area, you shouldn't have any problems. The drillers who cut corners are the ones that bring trouble." After speaking with me, she didn't seem very reassured about the overall safety prospect.

Sara told me that Seneca County had no deep wells yet, there had been no fracking there yet, and no private citizen complaints relating water quality to natural gas extraction.

Chemung County Health Department
Environmental Health Services
103 Washington Street
Elmira, NY 14902

March 24, 2009

Lindsey Brown, Water Quality Specialist: 607-737-2019

Lindsey told me that he gets several complaints a year from citizens who think their water problems are related to natural gas extraction activities in the area. However, he has been generally unable to confirm their assertions, partly because pre-drilling baselines are not available. He also mentioned that he personally knew of people there who had been "paid off" by energy companies to keep quiet about trouble that came up.

Follow-up: It might be a good idea to touch base with folks at Elmira College about this issue in their neck of the woods.

Allegany County Environmental Health
County Office Building
7 Court Street
Belmont, NY 14813-1076

June 11, 2009

Thomas Hull, Director: 585-268-9250

Tom told me that there has been plenty of oil and gas activity historically, but not much lately. Their biggest industries in Allegany County are lumber, oil and gas, in that order.

He recalled one incident: Homeowners in Independence Township with a 360-ft. deep well about 1000 feet from a natural gas drilling / fracking operation found contamination. Since fracking, their water is muddy, contains oil and smells of gas. US Energy is supplying them with water.

He recommended that I contact Steuben County; he'd heard that there was a lot more activity there lately. He also gave me the phone number for the DEC's office in Allegany, NY: 716-372-0645.

New York State Department of Health
Environmental Health Services
107 Broadway, Room 105
Hornell, NY 14843

June 11, 2009

Tom Klaseus, Director: 607-324-8371

Tom told me that they've received no complaints regarding natural gas extraction at that office; besides, they don't really track complaints that come in. He said that historical activity in his region of the state (Steuben, Allegany, Livingston and Yates Counties) totaled 1200 to 1500 wells, and he knew of some trouble that had come up in Independence Township, Allegany as well as in West Union Township, Steuben County. But those issues had not come to his office.

He suggested that I contact the DEC Region 8 office in East Avon: 585-226-2466.

In addition, Tom recommended that I get in touch with a professor at Colgate in Hamilton: Dr. Bruce Selleck, Department of Geology (bselleck@mail.colgate.edu). He suggested a call to Erich Wholers in Cattaraugus County: 716-373-8050, ext. 6.

Finally, he recommended that I contact officials in Bradford Township, McKean County, PA.

Wyoming County Health Department
Environmental Health Division
5362 Mungers Mill Road
Silver Springs, NY 14550

June 12, 2009

Steve Perkins, Environmental Engineer: 585-786-8894

Steve told me they had had no adverse effects from old activities (mostly private oil and gas wells). There was no new activity that he knew of.

Follow-up: I'd like to speak with the Health Department's director, Dr. Gregory Collins (DO, MPH): 585-786-8890 / 8670.

Genesee County Health Department
Environmental Health Division
County Building II
3837 West Main Street
Batavia, NY 14020

June 12, 2009

David Luhicroft, Sanitarian: 585-344-2580, ext. 5510

Dave told me most of the oil and gas activity in Genesee County was pretty old. Regarding new activity, he knew of trouble that had occurred at the US Gypsum mine / paper factory. Their attempt at private drilling and fracking for natural gas resulted in the company's water well becoming contaminated, particularly with "sulfur", chemical smell, bad appearance, etc.

Livingston County Department of Health
Center for Environmental Health
2 Murray Hill Drive
Mt. Morris, NY 14510

June 12, 2009

James Mazurowski, Director of Environmental Health: 585-243-7280 / 585-335-1717

Jim told me that Livingston County had seen small scale development of oil and gas (unlike salt, which was a big deal there). All the wells were old and played out, and he was aware of no real impacts.

Schuyler County Watershed Protection Agency
Human Services Complex
323 Owego Street, Unit 13
Montour Falls, NY 14865

June 12, 2009

Tim Hicks: 607-535-6868 / 607-481-0567

Tim told me that he receives occasional complaints that nearby gas drilling has messed up water wells, but his investigations have found no merit in those allegations. The major gas-bearing formation there is Black River dolomite, and fracking is not employed.

He said that their problems have arisen from access roads (field fragmentation, erosion, etc.), and problematic reclamation, especially due to soil compaction.

Tom mentioned that it will be interesting to see how things go when the higher-intensity development of the Marcellus shale starts up.

He suggested that I try to contact folks in the Troy, PA area; he'd heard of some trouble with natural gas activity there.

Madison County Public Health Department

P.O. Box 605
Wampsville, NY 13163

June 24, 2009

Eric Faisst, Director: 315-366-2361 eric.faisst@co.madison.ny.us

Eric hasn't received any complaints about natural gas development affecting public health, but he's taking a proactive stance. He's aware of some of the problems there, since two of his board members are Town supervisors where current drilling is happening.

His office has put out water sampling guidelines for people who live near drill sites, and he'd like to see pre- and post-drilling water testing made mandatory state-wide.

He has also launched a county-wide public health baseline assessment, using the ATSDR protocol (public health assessments for superfund sites). To his knowledge, Madison County is the only one in New York doing these assessments for cancers, birth defects, etc.

He wants me to send him toxicity information on biocides commonly used by energy companies.

Ontario County: no Health Department. People there can call the Geneva Office of the NYS DOH: 315-789-3030.

Cattaraugus County Health Department
Historical Museum and Research Center
9824 Route 16
Machias, NY 14101

June 29, 2009

Eric Wohlers, Director: 716-373-8050, ext. 6

Eric has been in this position for 18 years. He told me Cattaraugus County hydrocarbon development has been roughly partitioned into oil wells in the south and gas wells in the north. Most of their water quality complaints came from oil wells.

However, there was a recent mishap in Freedom Township, where 10 to 12 water wells were contaminated by a drilling operation. No fracking was involved; the fouling occurred with the drilling phase of development.

Interim Progress, July 1, 2009

Messages to which I've received no response (and need follow-up):

Tioga County; Erica Gifford: 607-687-8565

Yates County; Deborah Minor: 315-536-5160

Chenango County; Glenn Kaiser: 607-337-1673

Tompkins County; Liz Cameron: 607-274-6688

Erie County; William Murray: 716-858-8390