

Wake Up and Smell the Benzene by Dan Jacoby

In his 1882 play *An Enemy of the People*, Henrik Ibsen's ironically nicknamed title character, one Dr. Stockmann, discovers that the local baths, which are bringing a lot of money to the town, are poisoning people. The good doctor seeks to spread the truth, but nobody wants to hear it because they are afraid of losing the tourist business and the money it brings. Money is more important than health.

Today, across the southern tier of New York, local politicians have the same attitude.

Throughout the southern tier, extending through much of Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio, is a rock layer called Marcellus shale. This rock layer contains a lot of natural gas. In order to get to the natural gas, huge amounts of fluid consisting of water, sand and toxic chemicals are pumped into the rock.

I have already outlined many of the dangers of this process, called hydraulic fracturing; my analysis is available online.¹ Briefly, there are three, two of which I already covered.

The first danger is that the toxic chemicals leak into water supplies and evaporate into the air, traveling tens of miles from the drill site. Once the chemicals are in the environment, they make people, animals and crops sick.

The second danger is that once natural gas is released some of it gets into water supplies. There is plenty of video available showing people literally setting their tap water on fire because of natural gas leakage from hydraulic fracturing operations.^{2,3}

The third danger, which has only come to light since my column, is that, as one report on the Texas A&M website states, "Marcellus shale is highly radioactive."⁴ It turns out that there is an awful lot of radium in the shale, and that radium breaks down into radon gas, which, according to the EPA, is the second leading cause of lung cancer, and the leading cause among nonsmokers.⁵

So why are elected officials in New York's southern tier so eager to begin drilling? Perhaps the enormous amounts of money the gas drillers are promising has blinded them to the obvious danger.

Ibsen had his Dr. Stockmann liken politicians to "goats in a plantation of young trees; they destroy everything!" We can only hope that a real-life Dr. Stockmann will emerge, and that he or she won't be treated as miserably by politicians as Ibsen's character was.

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¹ http://danjacoby.com/politics/columns/writing/l_55_drink_up.htm

² <http://cbs4denver.com/local/flammable.fort.lupton.2.970331.html>

³ http://vimeo.com/moogaloop.swf?clip_id=4680635

⁴ http://www.pe.tamu.edu/wattenbarger/public_html/Selected_papers/--Shale_Gas/fractured_shale_gas_potential_in_new_york.pdf

⁵ <http://www.epa.gov/radon/healthrisks.html>