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Opinions

While searching for new fuels, leave New York's drinking water alone

By [Alex Matthiessen](#)

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Whether they know it or not, roughly 9 million New Yorkers - about half the state's population - get their daily supply of drinking water from the cool, clear streams of the [Catskill Mountains](#). And now the watershed that supplies us with this critical resource is being targeted for industrial gas drilling.

Many energy experts and environmentalists agree that natural gas is a necessary "bridge fuel" that will help us make the transition from a dirty coal- and oil-fueled economy to one powered by clean, renewable energy.

But before we rush headlong into further developing [America's](#) natural gas deposits, we must carefully evaluate and mitigate the impacts. And where natural gas deposits lie beneath a surface water supply, like the [New York City](#) watershed, gas drilling must be banned outright. While natural gas emits far less carbon and other pollutants into the atmosphere than coal or oil, removing it from the ground is a messy business - and, in this case, one that would industrialize the Catskills overnight.

Oil and gas companies recently have turned their sights to the [Marcellus Shale](#), a vast natural gas reserve 6,000 to 8,000 feet below the Earth's surface that stretches from northern [Tennessee](#) to the Southern Tier of [New York](#).

At the northern end of the Marcellus Shale sits the Catskills/Delaware portion of the New York City watershed - a complex system of aboveground streams and reservoirs that collect water and deliver more than 1 billion gallons of it, via gravity-fed aqueducts and tunnels, to consumers in New York City, [Westchester](#) County and other towns in the [Hudson Valley](#) each day.

The new gas drilling technology involves blasting millions of gallons of so-called slick water into the shale bed to break up the stone and release the trapped gas. Slick water is a cocktail of water, sand and as many as 278 toxic chemicals. Many of these, like benzene, naphthalene and chromium, are either carcinogenic or associated with numerous health problems affecting the eyes, skin, lungs, intestines, liver, brain and nervous system.

If gas drilling is allowed in the Catskills, energy companies will have to import heavy equipment to extract the gas, and build a major network of pipelines to export it. Thousands of trees and hundreds of acres will be cleared to accommodate new drill sites and the access roads needed to service them. In addition to removing these natural filters, all of this tree and land clearing will inevitably send sediment - which picks up biological pathogens - into the water supply. Each drill site will have an accompanying slurry pond to hold the 70% of slick water that is returned to the surface from the drilling process. These lined ponds could send hundreds of thousands of gallons of wastewater into nearby streams and reservoirs.

Fortunately, [Gov. Paterson](#) recognized these hazards and ordered the [New York State Department of Environmental Conservation](#) (DEC) to review the risks associated with the new technology. The DEC has just finalized the scope of this review which, appropriately, allows the DEC to consider the option of excluding the New York City watershed from industrial gas drilling.

While it should seem obvious that drilling for gas in a watershed that provides drinking water for half the state's population is a disastrous idea, the state needs to go through a formal review process. But we expect elected officials who represent the 9 million New Yorkers who depend on city water - [Mayor Bloomberg](#), City Council members, Westchester lawmakers to name a few - to use the state's environmental review process, already underway, to argue forcefully in favor of a permanent ban on gas drilling in the New York City watershed.

We must safeguard our water supply for this and future generations. If we do, the New York City watershed will continue to deliver clean safe drinking water to 9 million New Yorkers each day, long after the Marcellus Shale "milk shake" is sucked dry.

Matthiessen is president of [Riverkeeper Inc.](#), an environmental advocacy group that works to protect the region's water resources.