

Dominion Post 1

Morgantown WV Dominion Post Friday 28 January 2011:

Time to regulate Marcellus shale drilling

GUEST COMMENTARY

BY S. THOMAS BOND

The resource development of West Virginia has come in waves. The early oil and gas drilling came in the 40 years around 1900.

Anyone who has seen the 1912 geologic map of I.C. White covering Harrison and Doddridge counties must be impressed with all the red dots signifying wells. After that, it petered out, as oil and gas came in further West.

Timber cutting in the eastern mountains produced impressive wealth for a few decades, including the great houses that now belong to Davis & Elkins College. Coal stripping in the northcentral part of the state began shortly after World War II and burned itself out by 1990, and a similar wave in southern West Virginia now appears to be ending, more for political reasons than economic.

The only long-lasting resource extraction is deep mining, now in progress for over a century, but showing problems, particularly since the recent spectacular failure of the carbon capture experiment in Saskatchewan, Canada.

Each of these waves has been characterized by environmental degradation and discomfort of previous owners of the land and resources and their neighbors.

Salt water down the hillside, oil on the creeks and the earth left full of uncharted well holes characterized the early oil rush. The timber around Thomas and Davis [in Tucker County] and in other areas has not recovered a century later.

Deep coal brought acid mine water and sinkholes. The mine water is only now being treated effectively in some small areas. The West Virginia mine wars, so easily forgotten, were a product of deep mining, too. The problems of strip mining are the stuff of daily news.

The next wave is upon us, the Marcellus “gold rush.” Like each of the previous waves, in the beginning the Legislature and the Chamber of Commerce types cannot wait. There is a great stampede to avoid regulation and taxation. The environment and the interests of the “little people” are as forgotten as the morning’s last disappearing star.

This wave will cover most of the state, however. The Marcellus shale is under every acre of the western three-fourths of the state. A map of the once available deep coal is spotty, the timber resources were available in a few large areas, as was the shallow oil.

To fully exploit the Marcellus, 75 percent or more of the surface of state will be affected. This too shall pass. Marcellus wells produce fantastic volumes of natural gas, but decline rapidly.

The infrastructure is being built to get it out as rapidly as possible. Forty years and it will be a seriously declining industry. What of the water resources with which we in West Virginia are blessed? What will be the effect of corroding pipelines, eroding

access roads, the inevitable leaks and contamination of the buried pits?

Now is the time to develop appropriate regulation of this diverse, sprawling, competitive industry which will leave a footprint over most of the state.

The objectives should be to save the people, save the environment and to get the most natural gas possible from the shale. Without regulation the only objective will be to get the most immediate return on investment.

S. THOMAS BOND

is a retired teacher with a Ph.D. in inorganic chemistry. He is a member of the West Fork and Monongahela Area Watersheds Compact. He lives near Jane Lew. This commentary should be considered another point of view and not necessarily the opinion or editorial policy of The Dominion Post.