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S. Thomas Bond: What Marcellus promoters don't think about

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- The entrepreneurs who brought the Marcellus shale gas drilling into existence DID think about a lot of things. They knew they would be in trouble over water. So they arranged to excuse themselves from the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Clean Water Act. They knew they would be making a toxic mess, because they arranged to excuse themselves from the Brownfields Act.

And they knew from previous experience they should spill a lot of money around the drilling area in places like universities, especially extension services, also social organizations, civic groups and the campaign chests of politicians. There is a site, Marcellus Money, which tracks the donations to politicians. It makes very interesting reading. Millions passed in the last few years in Pennsylvania alone, to groups known as "opinion leaders." It's always best to have them helping you.

But the entrepreneurs badly misunderstand the number and nature of people who have an interest in the countryside. Did it occur to them that the people who like to fish would object to having the finest trout streams in the East destroyed? Did it occur to them that urban folks would object to drilling within a few hundred feet of the reservoirs where their water is stored, as the folks of New York City and the Delaware River Basin? Or the folks near Beaver, Pa., and now Morgantown? Did they understand the emissions from compressor stations would be so irritating?

They surely missed in recognizing how much some people like living in the rural quiet, enjoying the progression of the seasons, hunting, working with animals, building up a piece of property, keeping the family together. Seeing their grandchildren and their friend's grandchildren. And how much they would be upset when this way of life was interrupted.

They surely knew the toxicity of the stuff they were sending down the hole when fracturing. Toxicology is a highly developed science. But did they have any idea of what would come back up when the pressure from a mile down drives out a part of that fluid? Did they know what would dissolve from the very hot, high pressure environment down below, a veritable pressure cooker? It's the perfect place to dissolve a regular zoo of ions that are rare on the surface but present in the shale.

Things like barium, strontium, bromide and even some of the uranium, thorium and radium, which gives the Marcellus its distinctive radioactive signature.

Executives, like the rest of us, have to learn from their surroundings. They get paid, figuratively speaking, for thinking, but they have a problem most of us don't have. They work in a closed environment where information is fed to them by subordinates who know what executives want to hear.

One of the most visible promoters of gas fracking, went on The Daily Show claiming that he personally has fracked over 3,000 wells and never witnessed any contamination cases.

Of course not! He'd get his shoes dirty. That's what hierarchy is for, to take care of details. It also prevents the boss from being bothered too much by unpleasant aspects of reality.

Maybe you can win the lawmakers with sugarplum promises. At one time there wasn't much hoi polloi could do about it. They were not connected. Democracy was an ideal, but people were simply too remote for organization to come together to work on common problems.

No longer. The internet, printers, telephones and cars mean people can research what they are interested in and share.

We who live in the out-of-doors are not so isolated as before. And the level of education is much higher than it was in our grandfathers' or even our fathers' day. People understand and can take action. Maybe this was the most important thing the executives did not think about.

Evidence is accumulating. There are real problems out here. Bentonite in streams, gas in the aquifers, speeding trucks. It's time for effective regulation of horizontal drilling and hydrofracking!

*Bond is a retired chemistry professor in Jane Lew.*