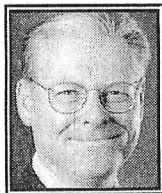


Don't allow Marcellus region to become another Centralia



GOV. TOM Corbett has been a strong friend of the natural gas companies that have contributed heavily to his political campaigns since 2008. Since taking office in January, Corbett has stacked his Marcellus Shale Advisory Commission with members who have ties to the gas industry and steadfastly refused to impose a tax on drilling.

Pennsylvanians have been told that drilling will lead to a huge financial windfall for the commonwealth and greater employment opportunities. But Corbett's apparent willingness to rely on the energy industry to set state policy for drilling has left many of us who live in the Marcellus Shale region to question how seriously Harrisburg takes its responsibility to protect the natural environment and the public welfare.

It's the same question the residents of Centralia, Columbia County, asked themselves in 1962 when the burning of garbage in an abandoned strip mine ignited an underground fire – a blaze that continued to burn and spread for more than 40 years.

Centralia, like many of the former patch towns that once dotted Pennsylvania's anthracite region, was once home to a prosperous anthracite operation. Founded in 1866, the town had natural deposits of coal that were estimated at 25 million tons. Local coal companies made millions of dollars mining the black diamond at the turn of the century. But by the early 1960s, Centralia had become dependent on waste disposal to fill the economic void created by the demise of the coal industry.

When Columbia County authorities reported the May 1962 fire to the Pennsylvania Department of Mines and Mineral

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Industries, the DMMI promptly sent officials to survey the situation. Slipshod estimates indicated that the fire was contained and could be extinguished with a minimum of financial and human resources. But no action was taken until August, when it was too late.

The DMMI tried to contain the fire by digging trenches and then excavating the burning material from the ground. But by the time the trenches were dug, the fire already had spread past their barriers. To stay on budget, workers were not permitted overtime, in spite of the severity of the underground fire.

Over the next decade, local government exhausted its funds and the commonwealth refused to establish a larger budget for extinguishing efforts or evacuating the town. In short, Harrisburg's plan was predicated on the amount of money the state was willing to spend, not the amount needed to do the job properly.

As the underground fire spread, it emitted poisonous gases that made some homes uninhabitable. In addition, the burning of coal seams removed structural surface support and increased the possibility of subsidence.

Despite these dangers, a state of disaster was never declared. Instead, state agencies largely ignored Centralia, refusing to admit publicly that there was a serious problem. Bureaucratic infighting followed.

Not until the early 1980s, when a 12-year-old boy nearly lost his life in a mine subsidence, was any effective action taken.

The state Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Health must not allow budgetary concerns or political expedience to compromise their responsibilities to the people of Pennsylvania.

With national attention focused on Centralia, the federal Office of Surface Mines initiated a buyout program to purchase local homes and provide residents funds to relocate. Most residents accepted the program and left. Almost all the holdouts eventually relocated after the state exercised its right of eminent domain.

Two important lessons can be learned from Centralia, as Gov. Corbett mobilizes state agencies to support Marcellus Shale gas drilling. First, a superficial assessment of the environmental and health hazards involved in the natural gas "fracking" process potentially can result in a long-term crisis.

The state Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Health must not allow budgetary concerns or political expedience to compromise their responsibilities to the people of Pennsylvania. And if they do, the heads of those agencies must be made accountable.

Second, when a problem does occur, state authorities must admit it and act immediately to resolve it.

Until state government learns from the tragedy of the Centralia mine fire, Pennsylvanians can only expect more of the same irresponsibility.

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