

OPINION

Will Andrew Cuomo kill another way to drill for gas in New York?

By [Ken Girardin](#)

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New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo

Photo: Christopher Sadowski

There's more than one way to frack a shale formation, and that could be very good news for New York's economically stagnant Southern Tier — if, this time, Gov. Cuomo allows it.

The region's prospects for resurgence were squelched last month when Cuomo formalized

the nation's first statewide ban on high-volume hydraulic fracturing. The process, commonly known as hydrofracking, uses large amounts of pressurized water to open fissures in shale deposits and release oil and natural gas buried thousands of feet underground.

Cuomo's prohibition has left billions of cubic square feet of natural gas locked in the Marcellus and Utica shale formations — roughly a mile beneath a region that ended 2014 with fewer private-sector jobs than it had in 2000.

But Albany's regulations don't necessarily spell the end for gas exploration in the Southern Tier. Two weeks ago, a group of farming families in Tioga County applied for state permits to harvest the shale gas under their land using a different method of fracking.

In place of water, the technique uses propane gas, suspended in a gel, along with sand.

The propane enters the drilled well, evaporates, and returns to the surface with the harvested natural gas, while the sand holds open the fissures in the rock to allow more gas to escape.

While hydrofracking has been in use since the 1940s, gelled propane fracking was introduced by a Canadian firm just seven years ago. Its cost-effectiveness has improved as the technology has matured and gained greater exposure within the drilling industry, and it has now been used to drill thousands of wells in the United States and Canada.

Before the Tioga County proposal was announced, arguments against shale-gas production in New York focused on the use and disposal of the large amounts of water — at times exceeding two million gallons per well — required for hydrofracking.

Opponents continued to cite concerns about water impacts even after the Environmental Protection Agency found the practice had not led to “widespread, systemic impacts on drinking water resources.”

The anti-fracking campaign scored its ultimate triumph in December, when Cuomo convened a theatrical press conference to announce the end of several years of supposedly “studying” the issue.

The state's official “finding statement” formally banning hydro-fracking was issued in June.

But that ban wouldn't necessarily apply to the new Tioga County application: Gelled propane fracking doesn't require the injection — or disposal — of any water.

The alternative process appears to fall under the same regulations that have safely

governed other forms of oil and gas exploration across New York state since 1992 — meaning that, absent any intervention from the governor, upstate could soon join the shale-energy revolution after all.

But the reaction of fracking opponents to the news from Tioga County revealed the core truth behind the “science” of their position: It was never about the water.

Within hours of the announcement, anti-frackers denounced the propane plan as “dangerous” and tantamount to “suicide.”

Clearly, for folks on the extreme fringe of the environmental movement, the ultimate priority is to keep the gas underground at all costs. From their perspective, no method of harvesting gas — under any circumstances, no matter how minimal the environmental risk — will ever be acceptable.

But this push to starve the economy of all fossil fuels is a policy no politician of any stripe can credibly embrace.

Shale-gas production would generate more real wealth than the Cuomo administration’s current economic prescription for the region: a gambling casino about five miles from the proposed gelled propane fracking site.

The governor, whose current term extends through 2018, may have assumed that the fracking question was buried for good. But gelled propane fracking has brought the issue bubbling back to the surface.

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