

Anti-Frack Attack

Published by Metroland, May 2012

They were holding signs and listening to speakers. Mark Ruffalo's voice moved over the carved stone like the space was a church, and cries of "Ban Fracking Now!" punctuated his speech.

Anti-fracking voices have always been passionate and loud, but this rally had a new energy. Called by the recently formed coalition New Yorkers Against Fracking, the May 15 rally preceded a concert at the Egg hosted by actors Ruffalo and Melissa Leo. The concert featured Natalie Merchant, Tracy Bonham, Joan Osborne and other artists. While these stars certainly lured people to the cause, the people on the stairs were not star-struck.

Many had been here before, among them Nancy Morella, a farmer from Utica who came to Albany in January for a lobbying day, and carried bread to the governor's office. The bread delivered a message about the literal threat fracking poses to the state's agricultural economy.

"I think it's a much bigger movement with the coalition," Morella said of this rally. She traveled this time with a friend who has been fighting fracking at home, going door to door with information, and tabling at farmers markets, but had not come to Albany on this issue.

New Yorkers Against Fracking is now 100 organizations strong. The group was formed at the end of March with seed money from biologist and author Sandra Steingraber, who won the Heinz Award for her environmental activism. Many farm, food, health and environmental groups have signed on, and member organizations include known names in the battle: Food & Water Watch, Catskill Mountainkeeper, Damascus Citizens for Sustainability, Frack Action, and United for Action.

The coalition unites a lot of organizing muscle from larger entities, and gathers the strengths of grassroots groups working at the community level across the state. The collective efforts are gaining momentum, and helping put fracking on the radar of more and more people.

Carol Murray came with her husband and their two sons from New Paltz. This was their first fracking action, and they heard about it from coverage on WAMC Northeast Public Radio.

A couple from Guilderland, Charles and Melinda Reilly, came to the Capitol Tuesday to protest for the first time. They have 125 acres on the edge of the Catskills and have been engaged in the fight on the level of writing letters to the editor, but the rally marked an entrée for them to step up their involvement.

Neither the Murrays nor the Reillys were staying for the concert.

The protestors snaked through the Capitol to the War Room to make sure Gov. Andrew Cuomo heard the call for a ban on fracking, and to invite people onto a conference call Wednesday night. This call sought to build out the coalition to 1,000 members by the end of the month, and 10,000 by the end of the summer.