

DOA at the DEC

*“Fracktivists” stage a “die-in” to oppose hydrofracking in New York State*

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OccupyAlbany, Capital District Against Fracking, and Water Equality staged a die-in at the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) building last Thursday (Jan. 12). People wore yellow hazardous waste suits, held signs and chanted slogans, pausing for occasional mic checks. “Governor One Percent Cuomo,” Daniel Morrissey, one of the organizers, broadcast over the human microphone, “is not allowing the DEC to really do their job.”

This statement was a critique of the composition of the DEC’s advisory panel on hydrofracking. The panel has 17 members, including industry, environmental groups, and legislators; the group was due to meet that day, but canceled the meeting, as has been their habit. This is the third time it’s happened since October.

Protestors Thursday at Occupy DEC felt the panel is imbalanced, with too many financial ties to the energy industry, especially in the environmental groups. Organizers chose Jan. 12 to highlight the planned meeting of the advisory panel, and also the closing of the comment period on midnight Jan. 11. The DEC received 20,800 comments, an unprecedented number, according to DEC Commissioner Joseph Martens.

About 35 adult protesters and 10 elementary students gathered on the bricked sidewalk in front of the DEC. After a mic check, Morrissey led people into the building. Ten kids from the Albany Free School started to follow, but the adults who were with them stopped them.

“We ain’t never gonna let you frack!” the kids shouted. “Free School kids are fighting back.”

These students had a class on the subject of fracking, and Morrissey came to the school to speak with them. All of the children wrote and submitted letters to the DEC. One girl, Aurora Sikelianos, wrote a song about fracking, which the students performed.

“I get how they want to use natural gas, but there are alternatives they can use, like compressed hydrogen,” said Harmony Bickerton, who is 10 years old and also researched the topic at home.

Inside the entrance to the building, people also chanted. A few in yellow suits began to sip colored water and die on top of each other. While no one is joking about fighting the serious environmental, economic and public-health threats of fracking, a protestor giggled at the absurdity of the action. If the die-in seemed slightly silly, the people involved are serious. Abram Loeb has been fighting fracking here, and at home in Afton, which is near Binghamton. He also carries truckloads of water to Dimock, Pa., where the water is contaminated; residents say the cause is fracking. The gas company involved in the drilling that has been tied to the contamination had been delivering clean water to residents, but stopped last November, once state regulators said its commitment had been fulfilled.

Collin Thomas of Capital District Against Fracking and Water Equality also helped organize the event. From May through October, Thomas worked in the Capital District NYPIRG office focusing on fracking. With colleagues, he went door to door educating people on the issue and gathering funds and support: \$240,000 was raised and 3,000 members came on board. Canvassing the area, he came in contact with many DEC staff. He was glad to deliver information to this population in particular.

At the Occupy DEC event, Thomas said the DEC is so short-staffed that the department hired a consulting firm to help prepare materials for the revised draft of SGEIS, the document the public was commenting on until recently. This consulting firm, Ecology and Environments, has clients in the energy industry.

“A truly independent consulting firm would be more desirable in the process,” said Thomas. Other problems with the SGEIS, he noted, were the fact that the Department of Health had been largely omitted from the process, and that the Department of Transportation’s concerns about truck traffic’s impact on roads were not addressed.

Siobhan Burke, a self-described fracktivist, was also at the DEC on Thursday. She said that from the start of Occupy Albany, there was an information table on fracking, and energy focused on this issue. One of her arguments against fracking in New York State is common among those who oppose it. Hydraulic fracturing for natural gas is unregulated at the federal level, thanks to the so-called Halliburton loophole, and asking the DEC to regulate such an industry is an impossible task.

“They’re nowhere near able to handle regulating this industry,” Burke said. “The last I checked there were a couple of dozen regulators to supervise the 14,000 gas wells that are now operating in the state.”

These wells do not use the controversial technology that allows horizontal drilling for natural gas in shale. Burke said there are documented cases of vertical fracking, as current drilling practices are dubbed, contaminating soil and water in Western New York.

“The concerns of the occupation, such as the disparity of wealth,” she said, “are shared by people who know fracking is being foisted on us by a corporate elite.”