

# 'Gasland,' a horror movie?

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MILLBROOK — "Gasland," the independent, prize-winning documentary made by Josh Fox about the natural gas industry, played to a packed audience June 1 at the Cary Institute. Concerned citizens, environmentalists and Cary summer research students filled the auditorium.

Most people already knew about the movie's subject but came to listen to Josh Fox, and watch Fox's 24-state journey exploring the consequences of natural gas drilling: water that can be lit on fire right out of a sink faucet, poisoned streams, deserted towns, pools of toxic waste that kill cattle and chronically ill residents from Colorado to Pennsylvania, where hydrofracking of gas has already begun.

A segment in Houston explores the effects of the more than 7,700 wells in the city which produce as much air pollution as all of Houston's automobiles. The film ends in Washington, D.C., with Maurice Hinchey, U.S. Congressman from the 22nd District, which covers much of the Catskills and Finger Lakes, questioning gas industry executives about the chemicals used in removing oil from shale and the poisoning of water aquifers.

Gas producers are pressuring New York state to permit hydrofracking in the Marcellus shale in the western Catskills right now and are actively buying up rights to drill. About 50,000 leases have already been signed. The largest unfiltered watershed in the world, which provides drinking water to more than 15 million people, would be threatened by this activity. Scott Stringer, Manhattan Borough president, describes it in the film as the "number one environmental crisis." The film was made before

the BP spill.

Lots of people came to see Fox, the young man who wanted to find out more about drilling when his family was offered \$100,000 for drilling rights on their property in the Catskills. His questions led him to make a movie, which has become a platform for action against natural gas drilling.

William Schlesinger, president of the Cary Institute, and Jonathan Cole, a fresh water ecosystems specialist at the Cary Institute, joined Fox in the post-screening question and answer panel. No one in the audience left as the panel discussion began.

The audience learned that more than 100,000 natural gas wells are proposed for New York State and that the industry is trying to get permission for 14 exploratory wells to start drilling right now.

"It's on the shoulders of the community to stop this," said Fox. "There's no such thing as an exploratory well. It's the beginning of drilling."

One of the summer research students studying under scientists at the Cary asked if it was true that natural gas is far more efficient than coal. Cole responded that it is true that per kilowatt of energy produced natural gas produces less CO<sub>2</sub> than coal when burned. But he did issue a warning.

"We need to look at the whole life cycle, and the local pollution argument," he said. "It's death by a 1,000 cuts."

Cole observed that this issue is not about climate change, which in his view is inevitable, but about the health of the environment and humans.

"The problem is the tremendous volume of water that is used in this drilling process," he said. "The water must be treated in municipal water treatment plants which cannot remove the chemicals."

"Once the aquifers are polluted

there is no way to treat them," added Fox. "You have the right to demonstrate. Go to Albany. Go to New York City."

Fox has been showing the film at Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) offices around the country to educate regulators. He said they are as shocked by the film as anyone else. Fox urged people to demand a four- or five-year moratorium on gasfracking before it's too late.

The panel discussed alternate extraction technologies but agreed that these have not proven to work. Fox called "air drilling" an industry shell game where industry promises to eventually change their techniques but will continue to hydrofrack.

Schlesinger, who is more optimistic about controlling climate change, observed, "You all drove in a personal vehicle to come tonight. Don't disconnect yourself from the cause of the problem."

Schlesinger's answer? "The wholesale reconfiguration to renewable and noncarbon based alternative fuels. This will only happen if natural gas and oil become expensive," he said.

Another question to the panel concerned whether freezing water to purify it of pollutants might be a solution.

"It does work but it's way too expensive," responded Schlesinger. In response to the question of the importance of natural gas, Schlesinger responded that right now it supplies only 3 to 5 percent, but said it will grow to a much larger share.

Although the film has already aired on PBS, HBO will run the movie on Monday, June 21. There is also a Web site, [gaslandthemovie.com](http://gaslandthemovie.com), which is an informational forum and sends out action alerts. The Cary Institute will be sponsoring a scientific forum this fall on hydrofracking.