

Published: January 09, 2009 07:54 am, The Daily Star

7% of Otsego leased for gas

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About 7 percent of Otsego County's approximately 1,000 square miles have been leased for gas drilling, according to the Otsego County Conservation Association.

OCCA has published a map identifying the leased properties so county residents can keep abreast of the natural-gas rush, according to Erik Miller, the organization's executive director.

`` This is our second map, and it's probably not complete because more leases are being signed all the time," Miller said Thursday.

Although companies have acquired gas leases for decades, activity has been brisk in the last three years as processes such as hydrofracking and horizontal drilling make it possible to extract gas from shale several thousand feet below ground.

Otsego, Delaware and Chenango counties overlie the Marcellus shale formation that may be home to rich gas deposits, experts have said.

While technological advances have made gas drilling here feasible, they also have raised concerns of water supplies and land being polluted. In other states such as Colorado, many water wells have been contaminated, and New York state is updating its rules on gas drilling.

Yancey Roy, spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said Thursday that new regulations, in the form of an environmental impact statement, will be in place this year.

After the rules are readied, the pace of drilling may accelerate. New York City officials have demanded that the city's upstate reservoirs be protected when this happens.

Local groups such as OCCA and Sustainable Otsego have called on officials to ensure that local water supplies are guarded.

`` Everybody's drinking water is important," Miller said.

Knowing where drilling will come once the regulations allow it is imperative, he said, and displaying this information graphically makes sense.

`` When we talk to municipal officials, we can show them the map and they'll see why people are concerned," he said.

To make this map, OCCA's President Martha Clarvoe and member Paul Mendelsohn of Cherry Valley gathered information from the county and relayed it to Bennett Sandler of Fly Creek. Sandler, a geographical information system _ or GIS _ expert, then worked to display it on a county map that shows public and private land, municipal water supplies and existing vertical gas wells.

Tracking the activities of just six or seven firms, OCCA has identified 638 parcels representing 42,974 acres, or about 67 square miles, in the county under lease. Sandler noted Thursday that public entities, including the state and county, own another 49 square miles of land, which firms have also eyed.

Sandler said he has tracked the leases by zip code and found that most of the land rights are being sold by county residents, not out-of-county owners.

The top zip code for leases is 13335, Edmeston, where about 6,700 acres are under lease. This was followed by zip codes for Cherry Valley, Mount Vision, Cooperstown, Otego, Unadilla and Burlington Flats.

More information is available at OCCA's website, www.occainfo.org.