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Abandoned gas wells dot region

Activist offers detailed map on company's website of well locations in area counties

By Ray Finger

rafinger@gannett.com

Steuben County is home to 619 unplugged and abandoned gas, oil and other wells that are a threat to public health and safety, according to the head of an Ithaca-based environmental database firm.

Another 41 of these wells are in Chemung County, 46 in Tompkins County, 11 in Broome County and seven in Tioga County, said **Walter Hang, president of**



Walter Hang

its website.

The map also identifies groundwater aquifers, surface water bodies and wetlands, and provides aerial photos and

Toxics Targeting Inc.

They are among 5,046 unplugged and abandoned wells across 38 counties in New York whose locations can be identified through an interactive map posted by Toxics Targeting on

ON THE WEB

www.toxicstargeting.com/MarcellusShale/interactive_map.

street grids.

"These wells are known to be a serious problem because many of them have leaked over the course of time and have caused really extensive hazards," Hang said. "They should have been investigated and remediated years ago."

However, the state Department of En-

vironmental Conservation said Hang is basing his report on bad information. Approximately 925 wells shown on his maps as unplugged or abandoned are neither, said DEC spokeswoman Emily DeSantis in an e-mail to this newspaper.

The detailed online map is based on information culled from 25 years of annual reports from the DEC's Division of Mineral Resources obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, Hang said.

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Wells

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The wells threaten homes, drinking water sources, water bodies and wetlands and can kill vegetation in the Southern Tier, the Finger Lakes and central and western New York, Hang said.

"They're next to schools. They're next to critical water supply sources. They're all over aquifers," he said. "The bottom line is people have never been told about these abandoned wells, and they are hither and yon."

Citing the Division of Mineral Resources' annual report for 2008, Hang said the wells can leak oil, gas and/or brine underground and could be undetected for years. Wells have been discovered in the woods, alongside roads, in residential yards, playgrounds, parking lots, inside buildings and under water, he said.

For example, according to one DEC report, a well in Rome in 1998 had discharged brine at a rate of five gallons per minute into a wetland next to a brook and killed more than an acre of vegetation.

"Brine can cause widespread environmental contamination hazards," Hang said, pointing out that it typically has high levels of dissolved solids that include a variety of toxic metals — such as mercury, lead and barium — as well as petroleum hydrocarbons and radionuclides.

"This problem has been acknowledged by DEC decades ago. They just never dealt with plugging these wells because they basically don't have enough money to do that," Hang said.

The DEC said it takes take all complaints of water contamination seriously.

"By and large, complaints received by DEC regarding potentially leaking wells have proven to be from wells drilled before environmental

BY THE NUMBERS

Some of New York's 5,046 unplugged and abandoned gas, oil and other wells, by county:

- » Allegany — 1,343
- » Cattaraugus — 1,071
- » Steuben — 619
- » Erie — 429
- » Chautauqua — 391
- » Tompkins — 46
- » Chemung — 41
- » Broome — 11
- » Tioga — 7
- » Chenango — 6

Source: *Toxics Targeting Inc.*

regulations were put in place or were from naturally occurring sources of contamination," DeSantis wrote in an e-mail. "In addition, under the requirements of the draft (Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement), there are multiple protections and measures required to safeguard the integrity of New York's drinking water supplies."

Hang says the DEC does not have enough money to fix the problems.

"Plugging these wells can cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$50,000 per well, and as of 2009, they only had, I think, \$209,000 in the dedicated fund," he said. "This poses an incredible liability problem, for municipalities in particular."

This situation raises questions about whether the DEC is equipped to regulate hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, Hang said.

"New York should not allow any shale gas extraction using fracking until all of these existing problems have been fully resolved," he said.

The DEC has said its review of fracking is based on a history of successfully regulating conventional drilling, Hang said.

"Beginning in 2008, they've been telling the public, 'Oh, we've never had major problems. We have such wonderful regulatory programs that the problems that have been identified in other states haven't happened here.' That's a total lie," Hang said.