

## **Halt state forest gas leases**

*By State Representative Greg Vitali, D-Delaware*

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Recently, the Pennsylvania House overwhelmingly passed legislation that would put a three-year moratorium on the leasing of additional state-owned forest land for Marcellus gas drilling. The state Senate should act immediately on this legislation to help prevent the degradation of this valuable resource.

In addition to the moratorium, H.B. 2235 would require the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to assess the impact of Marcellus drilling on state forests. After the expiration of the moratorium, DCNR could lease additional forests only if it determines that the environmental, recreational, social and aesthetic values of that land would not be compromised.

House Bill 2235 is the product of compromise and is limited in scope. It would not affect drilling on private land. Nor would it prevent drilling on the more than 700,000 acres of state forest already available for gas drilling.

About 1.5 million acres of state forest sits on the Marcellus Shale formation, which lies about a mile below 60 percent of Pennsylvania. With the recent leasing of 32,896 acres to Anadarko Petroleum Corp., 724,000 acres of state forest land are now available for drilling.

Natural gas is extracted from the shale formation using a drilling technique known as hydrofracturing. This drilling could have a significant impact on forests.

Several acres must be cleared to create a Marcellus drilling pad. Access roads, a water-sediment basin, gas lines and other infrastructure need to be installed. About 800 truck trips are required to transport equipment and water to and from the site, and several million gallons of water are required to drill each well. Harmful chemicals are added to this water prior to drilling, and it is contaminated further in the drilling process.

Currently, there are fewer than a dozen Marcellus wells producing gas on Pennsylvania forest land. According to DCNR, 5,000 to 6,000 more wells are expected to be drilled in the next 15 years on state land already leased.

No one knows what the cumulative impact of this drilling will be. House Bill 2235 would give us more time to assess this impact before more land is leased. We need to proceed cautiously because the remaining unleased state land contains old growth forests, fragile ecosystems, and habitats for rare and endangered species.

State forests are important to many Pennsylvanians, including environmentalists, hikers, campers, horseback riders, mountain bikers, hunters, fishers, boaters and

the 70,000 Pennsylvanians employed in the forest-products industry. We need to pass on this valuable resource to our children, not shortsightedly lease it to satisfy a short-term budget shortfall.

There are much better sources of revenue to balance our budget, starting with a severance tax on gas drillers, which almost every other state that extracts natural gas imposes.

The Senate should take up H.B. 2235 immediately.