

August 2012



Groundwater – freshwater held within soil and permeable rock in underground aquifers – is one of our most valuable resources. Half of America drinks groundwater every day. Groundwater comes from rain, snow, sleet and hail that soak into the ground. The water moves down into the ground because of gravity, passing between particles of soil, sand, gravel, or rock until it reaches a depth where the ground is filled, or saturated, with water.

The potential industrialization of Otsego County by the natural gas industry and its possible environmental impacts – particularly those associated with the process known as hydrofracking, or fracking – may be the most important issue addressed by Otsego County in the 40+ year history of this organization. At the same time, we recognize that there are a variety of other activities that may put our groundwater at risk. Other potential sources of contamination come from past or present human activity, e.g., mining, farming and heavy industry. Growth in rural areas also brings with it potential sources of pollution.

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, about 15 percent of Americans have their own sources of drinking water, including wells, cisterns and springs. Unlike people served by public drinking water systems, they do not have experts regularly checking their water's source and quality.

*Most homeowners do not know the quality of their well water AND, as such, would not be able to prove water contamination if it were to occur. **With this in mind, the Otsego County Conservation Association is launching a groundwater testing program that will provide certified baseline testing of private drinking water wells in pre-targeted areas countywide.*** These data will provide:

1. a baseline for, and fingerprinting of, well water chemistry by which changes to the wells will be detectable, and
2. a better understanding of groundwater flow systems and subsequent mapping of aquifers.

OCCA is reaching out to you for financial assistance so that we may initiate this essential countywide program that will legally document and characterize groundwater quality prior to the advent of gas drilling – or other heavy industry – here in our home county. **We estimate that the program will cost \$80,000.**

On the basis of the Otsego County Soil & Water Conservation District’s “General Guidance Document on Well Water Monitoring in Advance of High Volume Horizontal Hydrofracturing” and U.S. EPA drinking water guidelines, 24 parameters are recommended for testing, at a cost of approximately \$800 per test.

Both water sampling and analysis will be conducted by New York State Department of Health Environmental Laboratory Approval Program-certified laboratory staff, after the appropriate test sites have been identified by hydrology professionals using previously collected water quality data. This battery of third-party testing will identify the baseline concentrations of signature chemicals typically associated with hydrofracking or other heavy industrial activity which may or may not already be present in the groundwater.

If later water tests show increased levels of these signature chemicals after hydrofracking, if it were to occur, the changes would provide evidence that contamination had resulted from drilling activities and these pre-drilling tests – which will adhere to the necessary chain of custody and methodology protocols – would provide legal documentation to be used for litigation purposes in proving well water contamination as a result of gas drilling.

OCCA’s proposed groundwater monitoring initiative is unique – there is currently no other program in the country that addresses the need for BOTH characterization AND legal documentation and protection of groundwater resources. While this scientific data in and of itself is valuable, sample collection and analysis by anyone other than third party water quality professionals and certified laboratories may not be admissible in legal proceedings involving gas wells in New York State. As a result, these tests come at a hefty price.

If we are to prepare our county for the advent of natural gas drilling or other heavy industry, and serve as a model for other counties to follow, time is of the essence. I am asking for your financial support for this program so that we can move forward immediately.

Concurrent with the fundraising stage of this program, our partners at SWCD and SUNY-Oneonta are collecting and analyzing existing data in order to direct us to appropriate well testing sites that will fill in the gaps and avoid overlap with previous efforts.

Please see the document, “Countywide Groundwater Monitoring Program,” for

further details about this important program as well as related reference materials and information regarding OCCA included with this mailing.

If we can provide any additional details about this funding request or expand upon any information included in or with this letter, please do not hesitate to call me at (607) 263-5425 or OCCA Executive Director Darla M. Youngs at (607) 547-4488.

The source of drinking water for most rural households in Otsego County is groundwater and it is also the main source of water in our lakes, ponds and streams. Yet, despite the crucial role groundwater plays in our rural communities, relatively little is known about groundwater quality. For decades, the oil and gas industry has maintained that fracking has never contaminated underground drinking water and, in the absence of legal baseline water quality data, it has been difficult to convincingly prove that hydrofracking has resulted in well water contamination.

Apart from gas drilling concerns, the importance of understanding the characteristics of our drinking water – and of fingerprinting well water and the aquifers from which it flows – is paramount to protection of this resource without which we cannot survive.

For these reasons, I hope you will find that this program merits your support to the fullest extent possible.

Sincerely,

Vicky M. Lentz
President

The Otsego County Conservation Association is Otsego County's oldest environmental conservation organization. We are a private, non-profit membership group dedicated to promoting the appreciation and sustainable use of Otsego County's natural resources through education, advocacy, resource management, research, and planning. Our major campaign areas are water quality, land use planning, solid waste management, open space initiatives, environmental education, and renewable energy/sustainability.