Gas drilling, DEC staff cuts creating a ‘perfect storm’?

by Deborah Goldberg

It’s never a good time for a multi-billion dollar budget deficit. But now is worse than ever, because New York State is facing the perfect storm: the resources we need to protect public health and natural resources are dwindling just as we face a looming environmental crisis. Some 225 jobs at the Department of Environmental Conservation are on the chopping block. The cuts at DEC, like those at all other state agencies, result in more reduction in the department’s unionized staff. While this plan may seem fair on its face, the one-size-fits-all approach is ham-handed at best and reckless at worse. Experience shows us it is a lot cheaper to prevent public health and environmental disasters than to clean them up.

One of the most important jobs of DEC is to safeguard our drinking water. And right now, the department is facing the fight of its life to keep water safe. The gas drilling industry is at our doorstep, clamoring for permits and exemptions to drill for natural gas while the DEC, like those at all other state agencies, represent a 6.6 percent reduction in its health and environmental disaster prevention and cleanup staff.

Agencies, like DEC, DEC, DEC. All state agencies are being hit by a perfect storm, and the DEC has been weaving an uncomfortable stranglehold on the U.S. energy outlook. How about solar energy? Often dismissed out of hand, solar energy may be the only solution that is large enough in scope, and acceptable enough to carry us and the rest of the planet through the long term.

Solar technologies include those that are end-use-specific and technologies that generate electricity, a ‘universal’ energy carrier that can be transformed, stored and used in many ways. In the former category are domestic and industrial hot water production, space heating (both active and passive), as well as niche specialties such as solar cooling and solar cooking. These technologies can be effective, practical, and often economically attractive, but their scope is limited to their domain of application.

The second category includes high temperature solar thermal and photovoltaics. Solar thermal — steam generation from concentrated sunlight and conversion to electricity via turbines or thermal engines — is the least costly of the two at present. However, it is best suited to arid locations where cloudless sunlight can be harnessed. Photovoltaic technology (PV) — the direct conversion of sunlight into electricity via semiconductors — is better suited to all types of climates.

PV has the unique characteristic of being highly modular — i.e., a large power plant does not need to be centralized but can be dispersed into many smaller units without much of a cost penalty. PVs are energy ‘breeders’ because they generate several times more energy over their life time than is used in their manufacture. The technology is well adapted for deployment on built-up and/or otherwise already occupied spaces, such as roofs, parking lots and exclusion zones. The best systems commercially available today can convert sunlight into electricity with an efficiency approaching 20% (up from 12% 15 years ago). The PV industry is growing at a compound rate of nearly 40%. It achieved a yearly production of nearly 4,000 megawatts worldwide in 2007.

Dispelling common myths

Solar energy is often dismissed because it is not properly understood, and more often than not, mischaracterized.

No sun: The first myth is that solar is only viable in sunny places like the arid southwestern U.S. It is, of course, true that the solar resource is more abundant in Arizona than in New York, but the difference between the two, as quantified in terms of collectible energy per unit area, is only on the order of 35%. Note that the solar resource in New York is distinctly higher than in Germany, the world’s leading PV market.

No space: The second myth is that solar energy deployment would take much too much space. Many respected publications — Newseum, The New York Times and Wired magazine, among others — have spread and reinforced this notion. However, the physical reality of solar resource speaks plainly for itself: only 0.75% of New York’s land area would be required to produce all the electricity the state consumes, assuming a 10% solar-to-electricity conversion rate. By contrast, the space occupied by buildings, parking lots and roadways in the state exceeds 3% of land area. For the U.S., the amount of real estate needed to generate all electrical energy from PV would amount to 0.25% of land area. Interestingly, this is three times less space than the area occupied at present by artificial lakes from U.S. hydropower plants. These plants only produce 7% of U.S. electricity.

No control: A common mischaracterization of solar resource is its lack of reliability. Because it cannot be controlled or dispatched by a grid operator, solar power is given little or no capacity credit. The question, “What happens if a cloud comes and we need the power?” is the first — and often the only — one posed by utility planners. Actually, in much of the U.S., solar gain indirectly creates peak loads because it is the main driver of heat waves. Since demand in most of the country, including New York, peaks in summer due to air conditioning, the sun can also provide relief by injecting power into the grid at the time of greatest demand. The fact is that during cloudy days, the demand for electricity is much smaller. Considerable evidence has been produced to support this assertion the statistical effective capacity of PV in much of the country, including New York’s major cities, exceeds 60% — in other words, installing 100 megawatts of PV would amount to installing at least 60 megawatts of ideally dispatchable power generation.

An even more compelling measure of PV’s reliability is that it acts as a very effective catalyst to demand response and load control programs — through these programs, grid operators such as the New York Independent System Operator (ISO) would have to produce 7% of U.S. electricity.

Solar power: A realistic solution for New York’s energy future

by Richard Perez

Peak Oil, growing energy demand in India and China, global warming, and terrorism have been weaving an uncomfortable stranglehold on the U.S. energy outlook. How about solar energy? Often dismissed out of hand, solar energy may be the only solution that is large enough in scope, and acceptable enough to carry us and the rest of the planet through the long term.

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We need giant steps, not baby steps, to save the planet

The United States emits about 25 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the world, but it is not taking giant steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Global warming is the greatest threat to the worldwide climate since the last Ice Age and can escalate rapidly beyond the tipping point of no return unless the mindset and actions of all sectors of our society change quickly and comprehensively to overcome this threat.

President Obama, Governor Paterson, the Sierra Club and many environmental organizations are calling for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80% from 1990 levels by 2050. Dr. James Hansen and other key experts say we need to escalate our efforts even more over the next several decades to reduce emissions more rapidly or it will be too late to stop the catastrophic impact of climate change for our planet.

As reported in the Winter 2008 Sierra Atlantic, Dr. Hansen wrote to Governor Paterson that “we cannot be aiming at a 50, 80, or 90 percent reduction of emissions... We must transition over the next several decades to practically zero net CO2 emissions.”

Thomas Friedman writes that all the talk about a green revolution is just a hallucination unless we act in a comprehensive, systematic way to make the revolution happen. “Right now we are having a green hallucination, not a green revolution. Because we are offering ourselves and our kids a green vision without the resources — without a systemic re-creation of a new planet...We need giant steps, not baby steps, to save the planet.”

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Get Out There

There’s nothing like learning about nature with fellow Sierrans. New York’s Groups offer a great variety of activities — and lots of them — for you to have fun while expanding your understanding. For an up-to-date list of Sierra Club outings, go to http://newyork.sierraclub.org and follow the links. For more info, call Bob Susser at 212-666-4371.

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[55x674]ATLANTIC CHAPTER OFFICERS
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[55x558]while expanding your understanding. For an up-to-date list of Sierra Club outings, go to http://newyork.sierraclub.org and follow the links. For more info, call Bob Susser at 212-666-4371.
NYRI victory: Defeat — or retreat — for the boondoggle power line?

by Jurgen Wekerle

A fter a three-year battle against the preposterous power line proposal advanced by New York Regional Interconnect (NYRI), environmentalists everywhere rejoiced on April 3, when NYRI shockingly announced that it was suspending its pending application while evidentiary hearings by the NYS Public Service Commission (PSC) were still underway.

The reason given was that state and federal rulings, in effect, prevented NYRI’s use of a ratemaking surrogate to recover more than $2 billion in anticipated construction costs.

A victory celebration was certainly in order for the army of grassroots activists (including Sierra, of course) who opposed NYRI. But was this a permanent defeat or just a temporary retreat by NYRI to regroup its discontented financial backers? Because of the immense costs and the disastrous public policy consequences that NYRI would have caused, questions persisted about what the project actually was, and how such a project could have been concocted in the first place.

NYRI is not an electric utility as commonly understood. It would not generate electricity like power plants at Massena, Bowline or Indian Point. Nor would it distribute power to retail customers like Central Hudson, ConEd, or Orange & Rockland utilities.

NYRI’s trick is selling a transmission service which are not engineering a system that NYRI itself could prevent a repeat of the 2003 Northeast blackout, which affected residents from Ohio to Maine. Nor could NYRI mitigate the periodic New York City outages which are caused by an aging distribution infrastructure within city limits. Paradoxically, NYRI itself could cause a system-wide failure by overloading connecting utilities which are not engineered to carry NYRI’s added supply, let alone the support of the proposed new power plants.

The spin masters chided NYRI for not employing the correct public relations techniques needed to manipulate political will to overcome environmental degradation and community dislocation which no amount of marketing magic could disguise. The grassroots movement, which only forced the world to take a ‘hard look’ at NYRI, but also at the state’s most critical energy needs. Industry merchants and involved agencies identified modernization of distribution lines (with and between service areas) as a top priority, but that is not a function that NYRI can provide and one that would work against NYRI’s financial interests. Unconscionably, NYRI has ignored the state-wide transmission improvement study currently being conducted by the same utilities with which NYRI seeks to become a state permit/siting authority under certain circumstances, such as when a state fails to approve a project within one year of the application.

NYRI has hired the army of attorneys and well-connected lobbyists to challenge every step of PSC review in what appears to be a clever strata- gem to provoke the removal of the permit process from state to federal jurisdiction where NYRI hopes to have a better chance. We can now expect an appeal to bypass the PSC in favor of FERC, as well as a ‘sue-and-settle’ litigation campaign by NYRI against both the PSC and FERC to shift interpretations of EPACT to these courts.

NYRI may have withdrawn its PSC application, but NYRI has not yet abandoned its project.

— John Muir

Another victory: Bigger Better Bottle Bill passes after nine years of struggle

T he Bigger Better Bottle Bill became law in April, though its implementation still faces delaying tactics by the bottling industry.

The victory is the first major overhaul of the state’s bottle deposit law since it was created in 1982, and caps a grueling nine-year campaign. The update expands New York’s bottle return law to include water bottles, which comprise nearly a quarter of the state’s total beverage sales. This legislation brings New York into line with other states, such as Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Hawaii.

The law also includes a number of measures that will improve opportunities for New Yorkers to return their empty bottles and cans, including incentives for small businesses and nonprofit redemption centers, and requirements for bottlers to maintain dedicated areas for bottle and can returns. These provisions, plus the expansion and an increased range of beverage containers, will allow the removal of thousands of new jobs.

The Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter applauds the Governor and Legislature for this important victory in the bottle recycling program,” said Susan Lawrence, Chair. “This action will protect our roads, beaches, and parks from water bottle litter, and also change the way our society thinks of recycling.”


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January, 2009, brought an opportunity to take a well-deserved rest, to stop holding our breath while waiting for the next disastrous policy revision. Green was the new black — everywhere there were signs of change. Wal-Mart offered organic cotton clothing! A new emphasis on science-based policy in the White House along with new committee leadership in the Senate suggested that significant climate legislation was all but signed and delivered. At last, we could stop fighting for the environment and get back to our daily lives. Not so fast. The problem of climate change actually lost popular support from January 2008 to January 2009. (See features on next page.) Economic fears became a reality for many. With climate change pushed back to the back of public consciousness, fossil fuel dependent industries stepped up to the front. The corporate profit motive is a force to be reckoned with on any day of the week. Now, in the face of carbon regulation, entire industries and their lobbies have pushed back. Carbon must be regulated, and greenhouse gas emissions must have a real cost. We — you and I — must not quit until change has truly come. Chances are that as a Sierra Atlantic reader you already recycle. You take reusable bags when shopping, minimize unnecessary car rides, and switch off lights when you leave the room. You are probably getting a bit sick of being the only one making an effort. You have our respect, and our whole-hearted thanks. Really. But we can and must do more. If the New Yorkers who belong to the Sierra Club (about 40,000 members) can’t work to turn this situation around, who will? It may look like enough people are working to prevent climate change — that others will be able to take care of it. But here are the facts. We can solve it — Al Gore’s climate organization has 125 registered volunteer activists in all of New York state. 1sky, another major climate campaign, is doing a little better, with 210 people registered in 34 regional groups for New York. Our own Cool Cities has more than 300 people registered, but only 50 or so estimated active members. Together, that’s only one volunteer for every 30,000 New York residents from the most visible climate campaigns in the third most populous state in the entire country. The Sierra Club is the oldest grassroots environmental organization in the country; our individual and collective experience can advance the issue of climate change. We can lead the way by example. We can be the first on the block to adopt the newest solar panel design, or landscape for energy efficiency. We can be the first to reduce the size of our homes when renovating. We can help to support, connect, and encourage other climate activists. The Sierra Club has launched a new climate registry. Climate Crossroads.org. I urge you to sign on to it and to others, major and minor, and use them to work with others in your area. If you don’t like e-mail or registering on websites, you can join your regional Sierra Club Group to partner with you someone who does. Let’s do this.

What you can do
Go on a Low Carbon Diet (a 30-day program to lose 5,000 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions).
• Plan or participate in an event organized for International Day for Climate Action on October 24.
  • Join or start a Low Carbon Diet group at your local library. See http://www.energymonitor.org.
  • Get a Kill-a-Watt electricity usage meter.
  • Go through your home to check how much energy your appliances are sucking away on standby.
  • Donate a Kill-a-Watt for your library or Sierra Club Group to share with others.
• Get a home energy audit and make recommended improvements, then tell everyone how much money you save.
  • Look for building performance contractors certified by the Building Performance Institute — www.bpi.org, or call (877) bpi-1bpi. Get more info from NYSERDA at www.nyserda.org.
  • Become a member of the Climate Crossroads, sign onto Cool Cities — www.coolcities.us.
  • Join the WE campaign — www.wecansolveit.org.
• Connect isolated or inexperienced climate-concerned folks to other organizers.
  • Join a local meet-up group for renewable energy or the environment — http://www.meetup.com/.

Chapter calls for ExCom nominations to fill five seats; deadline August 10

T he Atlantic Chapter Executive Committee (ExCom) sets Sierra Club conservation policy in New York state and administers the Chapter. Some ExCom members are chosen by their local Groups. Others, the at-large delegates are elected by the Chapter members statewide for two-year terms. This fall’s election will fill five at-large seats.

If you are interested in running for one of these seats, please let the Nominating Committee (NomCom) know by August 10. Send your name, address and membership number to Nominating Committee, Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter, P.O. Box 886, Sycosset, NY 14791-0886, or e-mail to bobbie.josepher@sierraclub.org. Please include a statement about your qualifications and reasons for running to help the NomCom decide whether to nominate you. Anyone not nominated by the NomCom can become a candidate by filing a petition signed by at least 50 members of the Chapter; the petition must be received by the NomCom by September 5. The NomCom also has the option of nominating more candidates until September 5.

September 5 is also the deadline for all candidates to submit the final version of their ballot statement of up to 250 words. The ballot will appear in the fall issue of the Sierra Atlantic. Votes will be counted in early January, 2010, with the winners taking office at the ExCom meeting later that month.

Remember these numbers: 350 — 10.24.09
• 350 is the number that leading scientists say is the safe upper limit for carbon dioxide — measured in parts per million in our atmosphere.
• 350 ppm — it’s the number human needs to get back below as soon as possible to avoid runaway climate change. The current concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is 389 ppm.
• October 24, 2009, is an International Day of Climate Action. Events will take place at hundreds of iconic locations across the country, including the Taj Mahal to the Great Barrier Reef — and places as close as your front yard. The purpose is to spark a global movement — to unite the public, media, and our political leaders behind the goal of creating an equitable global climate treaty that lowers carbon dioxide below 350 ppm — it’s the number human needs to get back below as soon as possible to avoid runaway climate change. The current concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is 389 ppm.

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Climate change: Why 41% of America still doesn’t ‘get it’

by Beth VanFossen

W hy does 41% of the U.S. population think that the seriousness of global warming is being exaggerated, as a March, 2009, Gallup poll found? Why has there been a decline (from 61 to 53) in the percentage of people who believe that human-induced global warming is already affecting the planet? These trends exist in spite of the findings reached by thousands of scientists after rigorous review over several decades. Five plausible answers are relevant.

• The scientific community has not done enough to emphasize the strength of the scientific findings and their implications. Based on a methodological model of skeptical caution, the conclusions of more than 1,200 scientists from 120 countries reflected in the reports of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have been overly cautious.

• Special interests have mounted a long-term, highly effective disinformation campaign to cast doubt on the prospect of global warming.

• The media, in its attempts to create a balance of perspectives, have in actuality created a false balance, presenting evidence and arguments without regard for the actual evidence for each side, or sometimes even suppressing information which would establish one side’s claims as baseless (Oreskes, Science 2005).

• The public, understandably confused and resistant to news that might prompt fear or action, has not been particularly interested in the issue.

• The U.S. Government, including the executive and congressional branches through several administrations, has added the special interests the history of the issue provides insight. It was in the 1970s and 1980s that the scientific evidence convincingly began to point to a looming global warming. In 1988, Dr. James Hansen of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS) testified to Congress that he was 99% sure that global warming was upon us and most likely induced by humans. After that, worldwide governments began to pour money into climate change research and continued on page 7
Unmonitored multinational bottlers lowering Upstate water tables

by Suzannah Glidden

A round the world and nation, water scarcity problems worsen because of overuse, population growth, global warming, and rising living standards, particularly the consumption of more meat, which has a huge impact on water. Multinational bottlers and bulk extractors are playing havoc with water supplies. In New York, Upstate towns are resisting.

In 2000, several North Salem, Westchester County, residents with 125-foot deep water wells lost flow sufficiency and had to drill expensive new ones down to 605 feet. They later learned Durkin Oil Company had gone into the water extraction business earlier in the year in nearby Southeast, Putnam County. Durkin’s application for southeastern's planning board for a size increase of its holding tank from 60,000 to 495,500 gallons. The town did not request an investigation to see if sufficient water exists for extraction.

Durkin subsequently bought a new fleet of shiny 6,000-gallon tanker trucks that can be filled up from high-pressure pumps at four stations. Now, tankers are seen delivering water on roads outside the area to businesses and residences with insufficient or contaminated water.

As water becomes scarcer due to over-development, or contaminated by septic and other pollution, more Durkin drawdown may occur with out restriction on the amount, without required reporting of how much is withdrawn and without monitoring of aquifer levels.

The Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition (CWCWC) called upon the governor, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), NYS Department of Health (DOH) and the state attorney general in 2007 for state groundwater protection legislation. But nothing has been done. Recently we learned that DEC will not be recommending legislation, but it wants to regulate big groundwater extractors and to collect permit fees.

Meanwhile, more than 400 residents in North Salem and Southeast, near Durkin’s extraction wells, will soon be served by sewers and a wastewater treatment plant. The water that residents now return to their small septic systems is filtered by the ground and recharges the water supply. When the sewer project is completed, water use is expected to increase and, after treatment, it will be exported to the East Branch reservoir. This double whammy — increased drawdown and water exportation — may well create lower groundwater levels, especially in a dry period, and negatively affect community and private water wells. Not only are wells run dry by over-pumping, but they can also become permanently contaminated by sucking in polluted water when the water level drops.

As hydrogeologists agree, too many ‘straws’ in a small area risk catastrophe, especially in droughts. Unfortunately, an environmental impact statement for the sewer project was deemed unnecessary and a North Salem groundwater study does not address these possible effects.

Additionally, a 65-unit condo development is proposed in the same North Salem area. The developers ran their groundwater pump tests in 2008, reducing the supply of water in wells of nearby residences. The pump tests were run in a rainy, rather than dry, period and were not conducted simultaneously with pump testing required of nearby North Salem Middle/High School.

Water protection in town codes and state law should require that water pump tests for new, sizable development be conducted during dry seasons, especially in areas already threatened by water shortages.

Water Resources Protection Act

In response to these deep concerns, NYS Assembly members asked environmental groups to help craft language for ground and surface water protection legislation. The CWCWC, the Sierra Club and others collaborated on a white paper about commercial water extraction which we hoped would be drafted into a bill by attorneys for the Assembly’s Environment Conservation Committee. Unfortunately, an environmental impact statement for the sewer project was deemed unnecessary and a North New York’s water as a public trust, with two different local ordinances to these laws, this “rights-based” ordinance has to be challenged at the state constitutional level and at the regulatory or state law level, which makes it cheaper to defend. These laws can be viewed at our website (www.newyorkwater.org).

In Shapleigh, Maine, local activists passed a moratorium for six months, giving them time to draft an ordinance. Then, after a petition drive for a special election (a binding referendum), citizens helped pass an ordinance that overturned the town board’s wish to have Nestle harvest town water. Other Maine towns are following suit.

These citizens’ rights-based ordinances have also worked in Pennsyl- vania, which has a constitution different from New Hampshire’s or Maine’s. Each state constitution differs, and where they differ is key to crafting an individual town ordinance. We are investigating whether the NYS Constitution allows such rights-based ordinances and/or referendums.

Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund

New England activists highly encourage the training and help they received from the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF). Upon request, CELDF visits a town for the cost of travel expenses and holds a Democracy School workshop on how to proceed with a citizen-led rights-based ordinance, and then helps write the ordinance to protect our irreplaceable water.

The public and special meetings to educate and pass such a town ordinance, although arduous and lengthy, may be swifter than a NYS
by Daniel Lorch

Plastic bags have been a part of our lives for decades. Almost every time we purchase an item, whether it is in a supermarket, pharmacy, toy store, or clothing store, our purchases are placed inside a plastic bag. Soon after we remove the contents, we tend to throw out the bag, never thinking about the consequence for the environment or the natural resources needed to make it.

Worldwide, the production of plastic bags and film plastic consume 12 million barrels of oil annually. Once used, they are immediately discarded, contributing to pollution in our public space, littering the oceans and rivers, and creating serious threats to marine life. Even though it is not publicized, the city and state of New York have been diligently working to find a solution.

The State Legislature recently passed the “Plastic Bag Reduction, Reuse and Recycling Act” to address the issue. Although this is a good step forward, it threatens to undercut a New York City law already in effect. The city’s laws are more aggressive in order to deal with the estimated one billion plastic bag residents currently consume, accounting for four to five percent of the city’s waste stream. These are some of the areas in which the city requirements are stricter:

- **Store size:** NYC’s law applies to stores of 5,000 square feet or more and to chains under a common name; the state bill applies only to stores 10,000 square feet or more. The stores in the city are smaller, and therefore 5,000 square feet suits the city better.
- **Type of bags:** NYC’s law requires not only plastic carryout bags to be recycled, but also film plastic, such as package wrap, dry cleaning bags and newspaper bags.
- **Manufacturer responsibility:** NYC’s law specifically places the responsibility for recycling bags on the plastic bag manufacturers. This makes it more likely that bags will actually be recycled.

Sierra Club joined with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and other environmental organizations to ask Governor Pataki to exempt New York City from the recycling framework that the state had just approved. The governor and the legislature reached an agreement to enable the city to continue its own recycling program.

The City of New York will benefit tremendously from having stricter laws. It will gradually educate consumers and retailers, ensuring that fewer plastic bags clog the city drains or pollute its parks. The city laws will also allow customers who are looking to recycle to do so. Previously, retailers had no or very little part in addressing the problem, so implementation was difficult.

Since passing the law, it will have a collection bin that can be easily seen. Aside from recycling the bags, bag manufacturers as well as distributors will have to change their products. The bags provided by a store will be printed with the words “PLEASE RE-USE OR RECYCLE AT A PARTICIPATING STORE.” Stores will have six months, with an additional six-month grace period, to put these new bags into circulation.

This is a great step toward eradicating the problem in New York City, once shoppers learn to use reusable bags. When that day comes, perhaps plastic bags will be banned as they are in San Francisco, Ireland, and Paris, where only biodegradable bags may be handed out.

Daniel Lorch, a 2007 graduate of Brandeis University, worked as a researcher in the New York office of the Sierra Club before taking his interest in sustainability to the Big Green G, a company that helps businesses go green.

Climate change: Why 41% of Americans still don’t ‘get it’

Organizations facing industry publicized the work of a nearly identical group of spokespeople. The seeming diversity of the organizations created an “echo chamber” that amplified disinformation.

Many of the skeptics who became active in the disinformation campaign were not scientists active in climate research. Most had little experience with climate change science, had published few or no peer-reviewed papers on climate change, or were retirees who could act as consultants or writers without having to conduct scientific studies.

Virtually all of the supported organizations published and publicized the work of a nearly identical group of spokespeople. Most also included the same individuals as board members or scientific advisers. This gave the appearance of a broad platform for a tight-knit group of vocal climate science contrarians. The seeming diversity of the organizations created an ‘echo chamber’ that amplified the disinformation.

The overriding theme in the arguments of climate-change contrarians has been uncertainty. As Robert Henson (2006) summed up the skeptical view: “The atmosphere isn’t warming, and if it is, then it’s due to natural variation; if it’s not due to natural variation, then the amount of warming is insignificant; but if it becomes significant, then the benefits will outweigh the problems; and even if they don’t, technology will come to the rescue; and even if it doesn’t, we shouldn’t wreck the economy to fix the problem when many parts of the science are uncertain.”

The impact of these claims were magnified by the interwining of industry and government. For example, ExxonMobil gave more than $4 million to federal candidates and parties during the 2000 and 2006 election cycles. Shortly after President Bush was inaugurated, fossil-fuel producers participated in the Administration’s “Energy Task Force” to set the administration’s goals for a national energy plan. This secretive task force exerted major influence on the energy policy of the Bush Administration.

ExxonMobil also successfully urged the Bush administration to renege on the commitments to the Kyoto Protocol made by the previous administration, and successfully lobbied the Bush administration to oust the chair of the IPCC, Robert Watson, who had held the post since 1996. The government even became involved in muzzling scientists. For example, between 2001-2005, censorship and control of government reports was wielded by a non-scientific ExxonMobil-funded and distorting government reports so as to exaggerate scientific uncertainty about global warming. Leading scientists and government employees were warned to avoid speaking of the science of climate change.

It is clear that the actions of industries, the government, and individuals have played a role in dissuading Americans, who have not done their homework in researching the issues, to believe that dangerous climate warming may or does not exist.

Beth VanSooy, Ph.D., is an independent researcher who specializes in public policy. She lives in Rochester.
Solar power is affordable and viable, even in New York

by Larry Beahan

The border between Erie and Cattaraugus counties is pretty country, forested hills cut by deep ravines. Fog shrouds the hollows. Occasional cabins peer through the woods.

Then at West Valley, out of the mist, looms a moonscape with an alien space station at its center; the Western New York Nuclear Service Center. In the next few months, state and federal governments will decide how much radioactive material to leave on this 3,500-acre ulcer.

My wife, Lynn, and I drove down Route 219 to West Valley on a rainy day. We crossed the roiling Cattaraugus Creek where Route 219 construction attempts have loosed a fault line, started it sliding into Zoar Valley. There, on Scooby Hill Road, a house is off its foundation, trees stand at odd angles, and turf, undercut by mudslides, hangs over in a fringe. Geologically speaking, not long ago our beloved Boston Hills were a flat lake bed. Erosion is rapidly cutting it into this rugged terrain.

In the 1960s, nuclear fuel reprocessing sounded like a marvelous idea. Cattaraugus County had empty space and needed jobs. Nuclear energy was the power source of the future and reprocessing spent uranium would take care of its radioactive waste. From 1966 to 1972, Nuclear Fuel Services (NFS), a private corporation, reprocessed more than 600 metric tons of high-level uranium nuclear waste there.

NFS got out of the business when radioactive leftovers of reprocessing leaked into nearby streams. When employee radiation exposure became a problem, and when federal regulation tightened up, they walked away, leaving tons of high and low-level nuclear waste which will be a threat to health for thousands of years.

The Federal government and New York state are left with the cleanup and are now about to decide how thorough a job to do.

The nuclear site is on two plateaus divided by the eroding waters of Edmand Creek and surrounded by Franks and Quarry creeks. They join Buttermilk Creek, and it pours into the Cattaraugus a few miles west.

Radioactive waste has leaked into West Valley’s ditches. It sends a plume of radioactive groundwater toward Buttermilk Creek. Buttermilk’s 160-foot bluff, a few hundred yards away, has a landslide. Plutonium has been found in the Cattaraugus behind Scooby Hill dam. There is the potential to pollute lakes Erie and Ontario and the Saint Lawrence River with West Valley’s poisons.

We wonder if, when we took the kids wading in Zoar Valley, they were in a dilute solution of Strontium 90. Clearly, it was a terrible mistake to put such a dangerous facility on such unstable terrain. The only sensible answer now is complete removal of nuclear materials from West Valley.

Larry Beahan, a member of the Niagara Group, serves on the Chapter’s Executive Committee and Great Lakes Committee.
New York's red tape retarding spread of solar power

by Phil Vos

In its 2007 report, "New York's Solar Roadmap," the Solar Initiative of New York makes a strong case for rapid, government-driven expansion of solar power. The right policies and incentives, the report argues, could help put solar panels on the roofs of homes and businesses all over New York, as well as create local utility-scale solar farms.

Businesses and consumers could save money on their utility bills by connecting their arrays to the electric grid, releasing their surplus into the system. The extra power flowing into the grid, the report argues, could help put solar power on the agenda of New York's leaders, who have been slow to embrace solar projects.

But the amount of solar power being produced in New York remains negligible while neighboring New Jersey is producing perhaps 4% of its electricity from solar power and expects to be producing 13% by 2020. New York's red tape is also part of the explanation.

According to a 2008 report, "Taking the Red Tape Out of Green Power" by the Network for New Energy Choices (NNEC), local zoning and construction permitting processes are retarding solar power in New York and other states.

NNEC argues that nationwide, home- and business-owners who would like to invest in renewable energy often "face multiple bureaucratic barriers." While some impediments are faced by any construction project, NNEC notes that they have been devised for small-scale renewable energy systems because of the urgency of adopting renewable energy and combating global warming. (Read the report at www.newenergychoices.org/uploads/RedTape-rep.pdf.)

New York is no exception in throwing up such barriers. Beyond adherence to the National Fire Protection Association's national electric code, there are no statewide standard for zoning or permitting solar systems. Indeed, "zoning" and "permitting" are sometimes hard to separate, as application forms and reviews may actually address both issues. Requirements are ultimately determined by the city, township or village, which can heap additional requirements on a full-time employee just to keep track of differing requirements around Nassau and Suffolk counties.

Several jurisdictions look simply at standard structural and electrical factors, but others weigh in on more subjective grounds: permits for residential solar installations have been denied in parts of Long Island because the panels did not fit the local "look"—even when invisible from the street. While such zoning decisions are often made in a "subjective" name of preserving a locality's character, in other ways they don't always serve the community well. A representative of the Building Council (USGBC) described situations in some parts of Long Island where the Electric state lags behind. The same impediments are faced by any construction project, NNEC notes, devised for small-scale renewable energy systems because of the urgency of adopting renewable energy and combating global warming. (Read the report at www.newenergychoices.org/uploads/RedTape-rep.pdf.)

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Several jurisdictions look simply at standard structural and electrical
‘Green’ overdevelopment poses a new challenge in Ulster County

by Tim Trompeter

What does it mean when a self-proclaimed ‘green’ developer — with a completed project to its credit — steps forward and declares, “We believe the best way to preserve is to develop”? The Town of Rosendale in Ulster County is finding out the hard way, as plans for a gated resort community threaten water, wildlife and community character.

It is an unfolding story driven by the dynamic interplay of opposites — investment interests vs. the public good, overdevelopment vs. open space, rhetoric vs. reality — taking place in a town struggling to get it right.

Rosendale is blessed with an extraordinary setting. The 819-acre Williams Lake property — the site of the proposed development — lies at the northern terminus of the Shawangunk Mountains, deemed by The Nature Conservancy one of Earth’s “Last Great Places.” The many thousands of eco-tourists that visit the region testify to its appeal.

The area around Ulster County’s Williams Lake teems with wildlife, including the endangered Indiana bat. Development of a gated resort threatens them and fellow creatures.

Rosendale is the site of a centuries-old, gated community boasting internal roads and ‘suitable screening and landscape buffers from public roads;’ entry gate; security, valet and concierge stations; a skating rink; yoga/meditation studio; boathouse; a wellness center; a welcoming facility; restaurant; bar; gift shop and other varied services catering to guests and residents.

The proposed development would consume and process as wastewater an estimated 158,777 gallons per day, a 94.5% increase in water consumption and processing compared to the old resort. Critical water reserves would be tapped. Treated effluent would flow into a state protected wetland. Blasting would occur in the vicinity of the bat hibernacula caves. A railroad link between New Paltz and Kingston would be compromised. Fortunately, a conservation easement protects 416 acres from development.

Still, the project defies common sense, and calling it ‘green’ is astounding.

Save the Lakes, a grassroots group affiliated with Friends of the Shawangunks and supported by the Sierra Club and the Shawangunk Ridge Coalition, has been calling for transparency and a sober assessment of the project’s potential impacts since first grasping the scale of the plan nearly two years ago. It is clear that the project would endanger wildlife and threaten residents while creating a closed, private enclave of wealth — itself a threat to the long-established social fabric of the region, one in which families of different income levels live as neighbors in mutual trust.

Through film screenings and symposiums, Save the Lakes has encouraged local vision while pressing to make the public and local officials aware of what is at stake.

A familiar set of circumstances repeats itself in small towns across the country: economic hardship tied to limited employment opportunities leads to state and local government, part of individuals and their town government. Outside investment interests arrive promising development, jobs and tax revenue. Too often, the town succumbs to wishful thinking and supports development that irrevocably changes both the landscape and the community character that residents hope to maintain.

In the end the town loses out, the environment suffers, and profit is stripped away from the local economy.

Over the years, residents of Ulster County have worked, with the support of state and national environmental groups, to assure that their region’s natural scenic treasures do not fall victim to overdevelopment. These dedicated efforts, including Save the Mountain and Save the Ridge — have produced a record of success that Save the Lakes is working hard to continue.

Tim Trompeter is a founding member of Save the Lakes.

Unmonitored water extraction

continued from page 6

Visit www.savethelakes.us to learn more about the proposed Williams Lake development and to support Save the Lakes with a tax-deductible contribution. Donations will be applied to expert opinion in science and law as the SEQR process proceeds.

DEC staff cuts creating a perfect storm?

continued from page 1

DEC cannot afford to lose trained staff at this crucial time. With fewer people on board, there is no way that DEC will be able to provide a thorough review of every drilling permit application, visit each well site repeatedly to ensure that required precautions are followed, follow up on inevitable accidents, or bring enforcement actions when industry violates the rules. DEC’s ability to proceed without that staff is a recipe for disaster.

We should learn from the mistakes now, not repeat them.

DEC needs more staff, not less, to improve its regulatory program and prevent illegal drilling. If DEC can’t put the program on a strong footing, it will be strapped. As we speak, it already is strapped. As we speak, it is running on fumes.

The salaries saved today will be dwarfed in the long term by the costs of inadequate protection for public health and the environment.

Moreover, even the short-term budget impact could be substantially reduced if we asked industries willing to make a profit from our natural resources to internalize the full costs of their business. Gas drilling permit fees could be raised, for example, to ensure adequate staffing for processing applications, monitoring compliance, cleaning up messes, and enforcing the law. If the polluters don’t pay, we will.

In other words, fiscal responsibility is not achieved with these cuts to DEC. Money can be saved by permitting costly public health and environmental problems. The fossil fuel energy industry can pay its own way, instead of expecting gifts from the taxpayers.

Deborah Goldberg is the managing attorney for the Northeast office of Earthjustice, a non-profit environmental law firm.

What you can do

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A familiar set of circumstances repeats itself in small towns across the country: economic hardship tied to limited employment opportunities leads to state and local government, part of individuals and their town government. Outside investment interests arrive promising development, jobs and tax revenue. Too often, the town succumbs to wishful thinking and supports development that irrevocably changes both the landscape and the community character that residents hope to maintain.

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Unmonitored water extraction

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that may produce weak protections. A groundswell of grassroots activism in Westchester, Putnam, Rockland, Dutchess, Orange and Sullivan counties is investigating how to put limitations on bottling permits (would you allow them to rob us of this critical groundwater resource literally from beneath our feet? New York desperately needs to enact a comprehensive resource management plan to protect our threatened assets. A commercial water-bottling moratorium from the governor (as Michigan implemented on bottling permits) would be a good step in that direction. The Adirondack Park, the Catskill ground and new developments in water protection at our website, www.newyorkwater.org. Join us to register the state constitution and explore hosting a Democracy School to learn how to proceed with local protection in your town.

Zanabich Gilmour is director of the Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition.
‘Boot people’ oblivious to mud when orioles appear

Doggone those beavers! They sure make mud on your boots. However, they also make wetlands, damming streams into ponds and creating lowlands into shallow marshes. They are creatures that threaten attracting creatures. Such creatures constituted our quarry when my bird class and I set out on a recent Saturday morning. Our plan was to circle a beaver-flooded lowland, skirting its cattailed fringes in hopes of encountering numerous colorful birds. That was a bonus. I went on at some length about how there is protein in nuts, seeds, and soybeans being high in protein and a concentrated source of protein and healthy fats. I told him that greens such as collards, kale, or mustard chard are high in calcium. I mentioned that quinoa (KEEN-wha), a grain, is in fact a good protein source in that it has all the essential amino acids. I talked about soybeans being high in protein and how someone eating a plant-based diet enjoys tofu, tempeh and miso. Here are some brands to try:

- Lightlife: Sausages, hot dogs, burgers, enjoy sausage and meatballs with their pasta, and have sloppy joes and even sandwiches with sliced deli ‘meats’!
- Yves: Non-dairy cheese — Follow Your Heart; Vegan Rella; Galaxy Nutritional Foods
- Pepperoni — Yves Bacon — Lightlife
- Non-dairy cheese — Follow Your Heart, Vegan Bells, Galaxy Nutritional Foods
- Deli slices — Yves, Lightlife, Tofurky
- Hotdogs — Tofurky, Soyboy, Lightlife
- Burgers — There are so many! Just try to avoid GMO
- Sausage — Tofurky, Gimmelcan, Ground Beef — Gimmelcan, Lightlife
- Peppers — You can rival a tanager’s crimson.
- Catcher, swamp sparrows, warbling vireos, kingbird, yellow warbler, yellowthroat, yellow-rumped warbler, catbird, cardinal, tree swallow.

Granted, we got lost a bit and ended up walking through more dampness than I had anticipated. My apologies to those who felt water seep over their boots. But we know that wetland now. We can tell you how pretty pin cherry blooms look on its dry upland edges; how marsh marigolds flower in mud at the edge of the pond; how red on the shoulders of male red-winged blackbirds can rival a tanager’s crimson.

We can do this because we are boot people, lovers of wetlands. I sure hope those people had fun.

‘Boot people’ oblivious to mud when orioles appear

How do I begin to be vegan?

by Betsy Naselli

I recently had a somewhat lengthy conversation with a lifetime omnivore about just what being vegan means, and where a vegan gets protein, calcium, etc. I went on at some length about how there is protein in nuts, seeds and beans or soy content of protein and healthy fats. I told him that greens such as collards, kale or mustard chard are high in calcium. I mentioned that quinoa (KEEN-wha), a grain, is in fact a good protein source in that it has all the essential amino acids. I talked about soybeans being high in protein and how someone eating a plant-based diet enjoys tofu, tempeh and miso.

I thought it was the way his lip sort of curled up when I explained that miso was a fermented soybean paste that started me thinking more about how someone as ingrained in the standard American diet as he apparently is, could easily and simply begin to transition to a plant-based diet. When I first stopped eating red meat 34 years ago, I was more challenging to recreate the look and taste of the meals I had grown up on, but now there are all kinds of meat analogs that one can feast on ‘bacon’ with scrambled tofu or ‘pepperoni and cheese’ on pizzas, have hotdogs and burgers enjoy sausage and meatballs with their pasta, and have sloppy joes and even sandwiches with sliced deli ‘meats’!

Although I don’t believe this is a healthy way to eat all the time (since although these may be vegan foods, they are still processed foods), it is an easy way to tip-toe your way to a healthier, lower fat, higher fiber diet. It is advisable to avoid genetically modified organisms (GMO), so be sure that the choices you make are non-GMO, if possible. Here are some brands to try:

- Bottled salad dressings — There are many; look for those without high-fructose corn syrup or caramel coloring or a whole list of ingredients that you cannot pronounce.
- Have your hotdogs and veggie burgers on, perhaps, sprouted wheat buns, and serve them with catsup that is made without — you guessed it — high-fructose corn syrup. Buy whole wheat pizza dough and make your own pizza with non-dairy cheeses, lots of veggies and ‘pepperoni.’ Take easy little steps every time you eat or shop for groceries, and soon you will have transitioned to a way healthier way of eating. Better for you, better for Mother Earth. And so, here is an easy plant-based transitional meal to try:

Green salad with bottled dressing

Kamut pasta
Pasta sauce
Meatballs
And for dessert:

Chocolate Pie
1 graham cracker crust
1 package Mori-Nu Chocolate Pudding mix
1 package silken tofu
Follow the directions on the pudding package to prepare filling. Put filling in crust, garnish with a few fresh berries, or sliced banana or chopped toasted almonds. Chill until cool. Serve!

I think you will soon see that it is actually quite easy to incorporate more plant-based foods into your daily meals. Betsy Naselli owns The Holistic Lifestyle Company in the Syracuse area. www.theholisticlifestylecompany.com The Atlantic Chapter encourages you to move toward a plant-based diet to protect the environment and human health and to make better use of natural resources. To learn more and to receive more recipes, contact the Atlantic Vegetarian Outreach Committee at dklaye@rac.com or 1150-406-2152. For more information, contact Ed Brown at Edbrown@comcast.net, or go to www.newyork.sierraclub.org and in the ‘Select an Issue’ drop-down list select ‘Biodiversity/Vegetarian Outreach’ and ‘Agri-culture’.
Iroquois

Groups collaborating for more impact

We are working with other organizations on some issues, strengthening our environmental efforts. For example, electronic billboards are a possibility in Syracuse on both the east-west and north-south corridors as they pass through metropolitan Syracuse. We took a position against them, pressed for and got a public hearing and hope that the size of our combined organizations will result in a moratorium until a federal study is completed.

Iroquois and three or four other groups will meet with Congressman Dan Maffei to explore his views on nuclear energy and stress the need for alternative energy and conservation. We will be a large group and meet first to plan the event for optimum impact.

Our members have been involved in the scoping process and in fund-raising activities to support the preservation of this unique area.

We are working with other community organizations to help a local elementary school restore a long-neglected nature trail, which we hope to repeat this year.

Debra Hall, our conservation chair, continues her work on groundwater contamination and vapor intrusion issues. Debra, who is also the founder of our group effort with other community organizations to help a local elementary school restore a long-neglected nature trail is most rewarding, as the teachers and parents are so enthusiastic and appreciative of our interest.

At the end of this month our annual environmental forum, Plan it for the Planet, will have at least 10 other groups ‘tabling’ and a presentation from a NYSERDA representative on residential and small business sustainable energy options. We will also get a quick update from a new program, a statewide initiative of the Working Families Party, called Green Homes/Green Jobs.

Mid-Hudson

Williams Lake becomes a major conservation issue

The Mid-Hudson Group continues its legacy of working to preserve the unique natural areas in and around the Shawangunk Mountains of Ulster County, most recently the Williams Lake area in Rosendale (see article on page 10). Our members have been involved in the scoping process and in fund-raising activities to support the preservation of this unique area.

Debra Hall, our conservation chair, continues her work on groundwater contamination and vapor intrusion issues. Debra, who is also the founder of Hopewell Junction Citizens for Clean Water and Clean Air, has received high recognition for this work. In 2007, she was awarded the Environmental Quality Award for individual work by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

We are enjoying beautiful Hudson River views at our new venue for speaker socials: the Hudson River Rowing Association’s new boathouse. Our programs this spring have focused on acid rain, Utah wilderness, and Arctic wildlife.

In the fall, our big event is the annual tag sale, which provides great social interaction for our members as well as a means for us to dispose of our unwanted items in a most productive way. Last year thanks to a church hall, we were able to hold the sale indoors and avoid the ever-present worries of inclement weather. Despite the diminished visibility for drive-by traffic, excellent organization and an abundance of great items made for quite a successful sale, which we hope to repeat this year.

Niagara

Group presses for nearby chemical and nuclear cleanups

In March, 12 Niagara Group members met with three state senators and two Assemblypersons as part of the Chapter’s local Lobby Day. We discussed the carbon reduction bill, the energy grid bill to encourage the development of solar wind and other alternate power sources, the Bottle Bill, maintaining manpower at the DEC, gas drilling in Marcellus shale and other issues.

The Niagara Group has received approval for a media grant from the Conservation Committee. Ads will be placed on public radio stations, referring listeners to a website we designed addressing the cleanup of the Chemical Waste Management hazardous waste site in Niagara County. The Sierra Club will be prominently mentioned in the ads.

Our members have also been testifying at DEC hearings concerning the cleanup of the West Valley nuclear waste site in Cattaraugus County. A resolution is calling for immediate cleanup of the waste, which has been stored for more than 40 years. We have contacted municipalities and county legislators requesting passage of a referendum calling for an immediate cleanup.

The Group will be involved in a media event at Buffalo Harbor complete with a flotilla of canoes and kayaks, calling for the protection of Lakes Erie and Ontario from radioactive waste.

Our educational committee has been showing the films, ‘Flow: For Love of Water’ and ‘Kilowatt Ours’ and tabling at events. At our annual dinner in May, we presented the Blake Reeves award to our ExCom member, Reverend Charles Lamb, and the Bruce Kershner award to Town of Amherst Board Member Daniel Ward.

Rochester

Environmental forum, effort to save old growth forest keeps Group busy

Sierra Club’s 11th Annual Environmental Forum in April was a huge success! More than 475 people attended this year’s event. There were more than 50 booths, including local food producers and providers and local environmental and non-profit organizations. Among the activities were green product raffles, seed give-aways, demonstrations, and presentations on bees and butterflies.

Light jazz music was provided by the Art St. Hilaire Trio, and Abundance Co-op Market provided light fare food. The speaking portion of the event began with Michael Warren Thomas, a local independent radio host, talking about ways people can grow food for themselves. Peter McDonald, a Clean Food farmer, talked about how to be a smart buyer of sustainable food, particularly meat. He also discussed restorative practices used on his farm. Finally, Elizabeth Henderson, farmer, author and community supported agriculture pioneer, talked about how consumers can support local food production and become co-producers through knowing their local farmers.

The Sierra Club thanks all those who were involved and who helped to make the evening the great success that it was.

The Group’s Committee to Restore and Protect the Washington Grove has finalized a master plan for this 25-acre patch of old-growth forest in the midst of the City of Rochester. People love the Grove for its grand old oaks, black cherry and tulip trees, many of which are close to 200 years old.

Heavy use is taking a toll on the forest with serious trail widening and erosion and misuse such as riding bicycles on trails. The Sierra Club sponsored a project in partnership with the City of Rochester to form a coalition of individuals and neighborhood associations to try to remedy these problems and tackle the problem of invasives. Now, after a year of effort, the Group, despite many opinions on various issues, has come to a consensus on a master plan to restore and protect the Grove for future generations.

We believe our accomplishment can be a model for others who are contending similar projects. For more information and a copy of the master plan, please contact Conservation Chair Peter Debes at pdebes@frontiernet.net.

Peter Debes