

Marcellus Shale Update: When the Snow Turns Green

March 8, 2019

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Residents of the Siberian town of Pervouralsk have been horrified by a sight they never expected – green colored snow. Vladimir Putin’s Russia, in the same way as the Communist Soviet Union, industrializes with little regard to the environment. Now, pollution from a chrome factory in Pervouralsk turns snow a poisonous green. Elsewhere in Siberia, pollution from open air coal pits in Kemerovo falls as toxic black snow and makes streets black and grimy. Meanwhile, residents of Sibai in the Urals must wear masks due to choking smog from a copper factory. Protests have broken out throughout Siberia and elsewhere. The Russian citizens’ trust in Putin has plummeted more than 33 percent since 2006. The environmental mess, together with a stagnant economy and related issues, means that Putin now has popularity ratings south of Donald Trump’s.

The Russian environmental disaster shows the folly of American states like Massachusetts and New York that rely in any way on Russian oil or natural gas, then claim that this is environmentally superior to building pipelines from the Marcellus Basin. Simultaneously, it’s a cautionary tale for the pipeline builders and the natural gas industry themselves about the importance of environmental responsibility in their operations.

New York and New England continue to pursue policies destined to produce both energy deficiency and environmental destruction. The *Boston Globe* reported that two Massachusetts towns, Holyoke and Middleborough, have issued moratoria on new natural gas hookups due to lack of supply. This follows Con Edison’s moratorium in Westchester County, New York.

Massachusetts’s supply constraint is the result of the Bay State’s failure to allow the build out of natural gas pipelines from the Marcellus Shale region of Northeastern Pennsylvania. The *Globe* warned that many energy experts believe that while the State’s two largest gas suppliers, National Grid and Eversource, claim their natural gas supplies are adequate for now, that won’t last long.

Environmentalists in Massachusetts call for increasing supplies from Canadian hydropower and offshore wind, but fail to state what the grid to store and transmit that power would look like. Skeptics also note that whenever a large offshore wind farm project is proposed there is mass opposition from many of the same environmentalists who oppose shale drilling. Martha’s Vineyard, Nantucket, the New Jersey Shore, Chesapeake Bay, Vermont and others are places where offshore wind farms have been proposed but dropped due to local opposition. Where exactly do we build the wind farms that the environmentalists want?

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It is this type of idealistic, irrational thinking that results in environmental destruction. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's "Green New Deal" calls for eliminating fossil fuels in ten years. Were this concept to pass, how would that occur? Presumably, a politically appointed group would be authorized to decide unilaterally how and where energy is created, where transmission lines go, and how it gets stored. To make this work at all, there could be little opportunity for public input. There wouldn't be enough time. But how happy could the public possibly be ceding this kind of decision making to a politically appointed body? And what about things like eminent domain and the need to seize private property for wind turbines, solar panels and the like? Where and how will power storage occur when battery storage technology simply does not exist at present to meet the demands of the system, etc? The result would be a disaster for our environment, if it could even work at all which is most dubious.

Of course, the opposite also is true. The energy industry must show continually that it can preserve the environment as it performs its tasks. Those who wish to see the end of the fossil fuel industry will not hesitate to point to every mistake that the industry makes as rationalization for its elimination. Last week the CEO of Energy Transfer Partners, the company building the Mariner East 2 pipeline, admitted that "we've made mistakes and we are correcting those mistakes and will not make those mistakes again." Let's hope he means it. Mariner East has been plagued with problems, and ETP has done little before to show it cares or that it even is aware of the depth of suspicion that exists toward its performance.

From a political standpoint, environmental degradation can have enormous consequences. Putin, already facing dissent over his economic performance, must deal with the people who can't understand why their snow now is poisonous. The air in Beijing is so bad that Chinese Communist leaders no longer can just add more factories to China's enormous metropolises. Ironically, the pollution itself is the only thing capable of putting a stop to its creation.

It remains true that the greatest environmental destruction occurs in places wholly run by government. The Massachusetts and Mariner situations remind us we need to seek the proper balance. That will be a continuous but evolving process in which both public and private interests must participate. Without both, our planet will not be safe.

Questions? Let Dan know.