

Actor Mark Ruffalo checks water samples from Dimock, Pa., where fracking had occurred. The trip was organized by the NRDC and Catskill Mountainkeeper to draw attention to the drinking water problems residents there are facing.

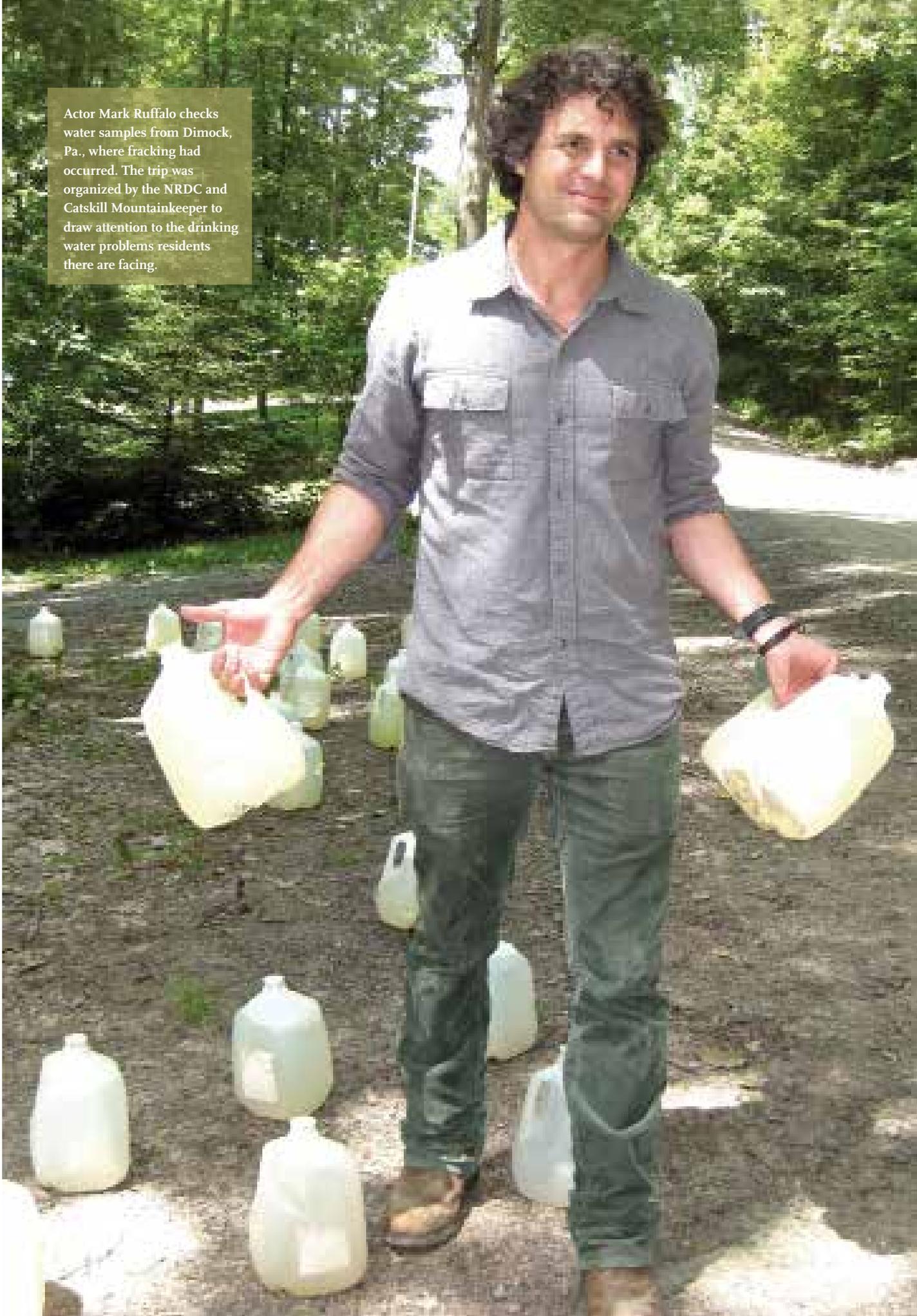


PHOTO BY MARK A. IZEMAN

FRACKING HITS CLOSE TO HOME

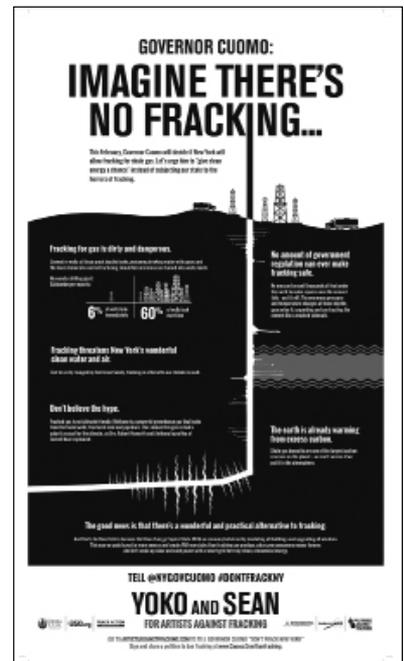
What happens when big names and small towns discover a lot of common ground

Lisa Mullenneaux

“GOVERNOR CUOMO: IMAGINE THERE’S NO FRACKING,” read a billboard on the Major Deegan Expressway into Manhattan last October. One of the motorists who saw it may well have been Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has been under increasing pressure from New York state residents to ban the shale gas extraction method known as “fracking.” The billboard was the first action by Yoko Ono and her son Sean Lennon’s advocacy coalition Artists Against Fracking, which boasts nearly 200 famous members ranging from Salman Rushdie to Lady Gaga.

What spurred mother and son to organize artists like themselves was the threat to their Delaware County farm that sits atop the Marcellus Shale, a rock formation geologists estimate holds trillions of cubic feet of natural gas. “I have always felt lucky,” Lennon wrote in an op-ed for *The New York Times*, “to live on land [my father] loved dearly.” Sean Lennon’s father was, of course, the legendary musician and former Beatle John Lennon, not the first city resident to want a rural escape.

Sean Lennon’s education about fracking began with gas companies’ pitches at a local high school in spring 2012. “[They] were trying very hard to sell us,” he wrote, “on a plan to tear through our wilderness and make room for a new pipeline: infrastructure for hydraulic fracturing. Most of the residents at the meeting, many of them organic farmers, were openly defiant. The gas companies didn’t seem to care.” Lennon did his homework, and is now a well-informed opponent of fracking—like actors Mark Ruffalo, Debra Winger, Melissa Leo, and other public personalities who have lent star power to this critical environmental issue for the Empire State.



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LORI VAN BUREN FOR THE TIMES UNION

Actress Debra Winger, an executive producer of *Gasland*, has lived in Sullivan County for 22 years: “As soon as we can move on from this death grip that the oil and gas industry has on us ... we will be able to start putting our minds on a healthy, prosperous future without fossil fuel.”

» State writes its own guidelines

Concerns about the environmental and public health effects of high-volume horizontal gas drilling have kept a moratorium on fracking in New York since 2008. That’s the year the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), under then-Governor David Paterson, began to update permitting guidelines for this new technology through its Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement. In 2012, physicians, scientists, and medical groups appealed to Cuomo to do a comprehensive health impact assessment of fracking. Instead, the DEC commissioner asked the state health commissioner and a trio of out-of-state experts for advice. As of December 2012, their analysis of DEC guidelines was still under review.

Sandra Steingraber is an environmental biologist and well-known

author who has written extensively on the health risks of toxic industrial practices. She’s a New York resident who has become a prominent opponent of fracking. When the DEC rejected the call for a health impact assessment and released its revised regulations for public comment, Steingraber urged opponents to flood the DEC with comments, demonstrate in Albany during Governor Cuomo’s annual State of the State address in January, and spread the word. “This is our moment,” she said, “to tell Governor Cuomo to lead the way to a renewable energy future.”

A visit to Dimock

Like most successful actors, Mark Ruffalo could plant his family anywhere, but he fell in love with Sullivan County’s trout-rich streams and hemlock forests; they reminded him of Wisconsin, where he grew up. At

first Ruffalo was enthusiastic about the gas extraction rumors he heard in Callicoon. But that changed in June 2010 when he visited Dimock, Pa., just across the state border. He made that trip with environmental lawyer Robert Kennedy Jr. at the invitation of Ramsay Adams, founder and executive director of Catskill Mountainkeeper, a regional conservation group.

Adams introduced Kennedy and Ruffalo to Dimock residents who felt conned and sickened. “We inspected contaminated wells and heard residents’ complaints of feeling abandoned by companies leasing their land and by their elected officials,” recalls Ruffalo of his Dimock trip. “In fact, they were looking to Kennedy and me to save them.” By the end of that visit, Ruffalo’s view of fracking had done a 180-degree turn. “I think what you’re doing is terrific,” Ruffalo told Adams. “Let me know how I can help.”

To many of Mark Ruffalo’s neighbors in Callicoon, an offer of \$5,000 an acre from the gas industry and the promise of future royalties is tempting. In fact, hundreds of homeowners in Sullivan and adjacent counties have already signed leases and confidentiality agreements. But not Adam Diehl and his family, who have committed to keeping their dairy farm going for the next generation. “We depend on good water,” explains Diehl, “for our cows, our crops, and our own health. Once you mess up your groundwater, you can’t fix it.” Asked about Ruffalo’s anti-fracking advocacy, he says, “Our little voices don’t carry very far. It’s good we have people like him.”

Fracking is exempt from the regulations of the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the risk of groundwater contamination is one of many reasons singer/songwriter Natalie Merchant joined the opposition. “I met families from Dimock who had been victimized by Cabot Oil & Gas,” says the Stone Ridge, N.Y., resident. “It broke my heart to hear about their three-and-a-half-year struggle to get replacement water and compensation.”

“I am terrified what will happen to this state,” adds Merchant, “the state I was born in and have lived in for almost 50 years, if hydraulic fracturing begins here. It’s a Pandora’s box we don’t want to open.” The need to send Governor Cuomo a powerful message prompted Merchant to rally her musician and actor friends for a protest and concert at the state capital in Albany last May. “I’d never asked favors from anyone, but I spent three weeks on my knees, begging. Those entertainers who couldn’t participate—like David Byrne and Paul Simon—donated the rights to their songs.”

The result was a powerful call to ban fracking from a powerfully talented group—actors Ruffalo and Melissa Leo, scientist Steingraber, musicians John Sebastian, Joan Osborne, Dan Zanes, The Felice Brothers, Medeski Martin & Wood, Citizen Cope, and Toshi Reagon. Merchant’s collaborator and partner, Jon Bowermaster, directed the events, which were filmed by Alex Gibney. *Dear Governor Cuomo* documents a remarkable concert that ends with a directive for its audience: Call the governor!

“All those who participated in the concert are New Yorkers, as I am,” says Bowermaster, who is currently screening the film all over the state. “Natalie and I have people asking us what to tell their neighbors who are considering leasing their lands, how to present the facts landmen [salesmen for oil and gas companies] won’t tell them. We send them a DVD of our film.” He’s encouraged by how New Yorkers have responded. “Typically New York’s Department of Conservation receives about 1,000 letters in response to a proposal; during the public comment period that ended January 11, it received over 200,000 letters plus tweets, Facebook comments, and emails.”

Fracking on film

Increasingly, this fracking fight is being played out on the big screen, but it started with a very modest 2010 film called *Gasland*. Josh Fox’s



PHOTOS BY SCOTT GREEN

Promised Land, directed by Gus Van Sant and based on a story by Dave Eggers, stars Matt Damon, John Krasinski, Frances McDormand, and Hal Holbrook. The movie, which was filmed in Pittsburgh, highlights issues related to fracking.

YesMagazine.org/promised-land

YES! publisher Fran Korten interviews *Promised Land* producer Chris Moore



» family in Milanville, Pa., was weighing their options after being offered a gas extraction lease. Video camera in hand, Fox traveled to western states where the shale gas boom was underway and spoke with homeowners there. *Gasland* is the result, a home movie that became a media “blowout” (slang for a gas explosion) for the oil and gas industry.

Fox showed early footage of the film to actress Debra Winger, who has lived in Sullivan County for 22 years and raised her three sons there. She signed on as an executive producer and has become as outspoken as Ruffalo about protecting her family home and way of life. “I know people see the economic

re-election came from fracking-related sources, according to Common Cause.

“Big Names Aren’t Helping Our Small Towns” was the banner headline of an ad campaign by the Independent Oil and Gas Association of New York last August. At rallies to encourage Cuomo to lift the fracking moratorium, the group passed out postcards of Ruffalo, Winger, and Fox with the message: “Reading from a script doesn’t make you a scientist or geologist.”

Frack Action’s John Armstrong looks at it another way: “These celebrities are our neighbors; they have every right to take a stand on this issue.”

Dr. Kathleen Nolan with Catskill

what we’re going to do. And that is a right that only has value if we exercise it. If we actually do it.”

So far 41 New York towns have used local zoning ordinances to ban fracking, fearing the scale of industrialization would destroy their communities.

Against all odds, New Yorkers continue to hold off fracking in their state. The media appeal of movie stars is helping, as are the persuasive skills of the filmmakers, musicians, and storytellers. But what drives celebrities to take part is clearly not fame or money. It’s the same motivation as that of their friends and neighbors—quality of life. The assurance that their water is

SO FAR 41 NEW YORK TOWNS HAVE **USED LOCAL ZONING ORDINANCES TO BAN FRACKING**, FEARING THE SCALE OF INDUSTRIALIZATION WOULD DESTROY THEIR COMMUNITIES.

benefits [of fracking] as a panacea, and they feel that my opinion is compromised by my success in the world,” said Winger. “But the public health problems that have plagued this practice make it impossible for me to see it as the answer to our county’s or our state’s woes. As soon as we can move on from this death grip that the oil and gas industry has on us ... we will be able to start putting our minds on a healthy, prosperous future without fossil fuel.”

Working to promote the economic benefits of shale gas drilling in a state where farmers and small business owners are struggling to survive, supporters of the energy industry dismiss celebrity activists as meddlers or outsiders. New York Senate Deputy Majority Leader Tom Libous, for example, was cheered at a rally in Albany on October 16, 2012, when he attacked them. “Stay in Hollywood,” he said. “We don’t want to hear it here.”

The rally was organized and paid for by Landowner Advocates of New York, a front group tied to the Independent Petroleum Association of America. Libous already knows how lucrative a gas industry alliance can be: \$190,700 of the contributions to his 2012

Mountainkeeper argues that recruiting celebrity activists is justified. “The energy industry has had opportunities again and again to roll out its agenda for New York state,” says Nolan. “We are simply asking for equal time to present the case against fracking, and it’s important for those who have a media presence to lend their support. ... When you’re fighting Goliath, you want David to have as much ammunition as possible.”

Some of that ammunition comes in the form of the \$15-million feature film *Promised Land*, based on a story by Dave Eggers, directed by Gus Van Sant, and starring Matt Damon, John Krasinski, Frances McDormand, and Hal Holbrook. In *Promised Land*, Damon plays an energy company salesman who comes to question his role promoting hydraulic fracking to farmers in a small Pennsylvania town. Producer Chris Moore says one of the movie’s themes is self-government: “We have a right as a community—whatever the community is, whether it’s a group of neighbors, whether it’s a town, whether it’s a county, whether it’s a state, whether it’s a city, whether it’s a country—we have the right to decide

safe to drink, their air safe to breathe, their soil safe to grow vegetables. That their rural community won’t become a brownfield.

On January 11, the final day of the DEC’s public comment period, Yoko Ono and Sean Lennon appeared at a rally at the state capital in Albany where 204,000 public comments against fracking were delivered. A decision is expected from the state by the end of February.

Will New York’s governor decide to open southern New York to fracking, continue the moratorium, or make New York the second U.S. state with a ban on horizontal drilling?

“Time is on the side of those of us who oppose fracking, because, as time goes by, it looks more and more like it’s the wrong thing to do,” says Steingraber. Filmmaker Bowermaster describes the contest in more dramatic terms. “It’s like the ultimate thriller,” he says. “No one knows how it will end.”



Lisa Mullenneaux is a journalist based in Manhattan and Woodstock, N.Y. Her books and articles are described at lisamullenneaux.com.

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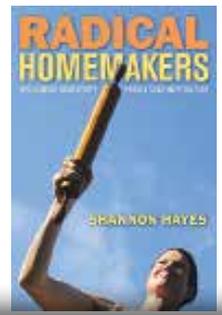
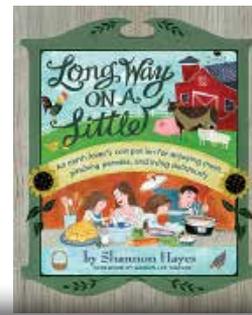
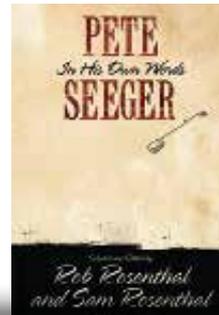
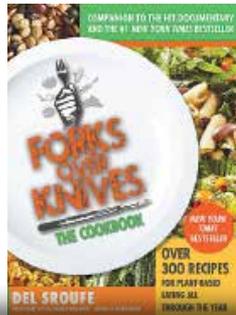
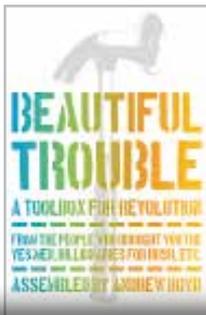
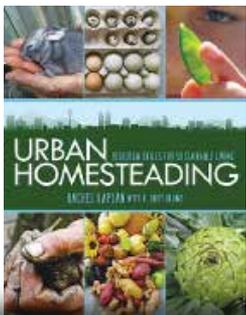
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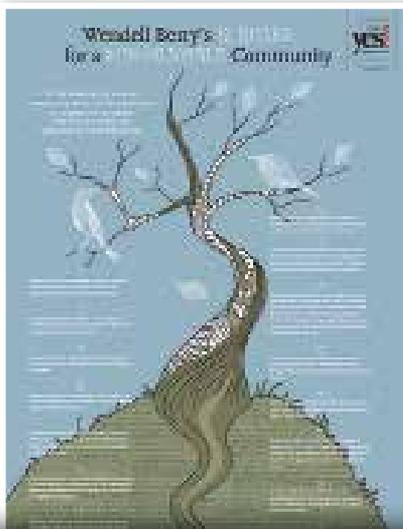
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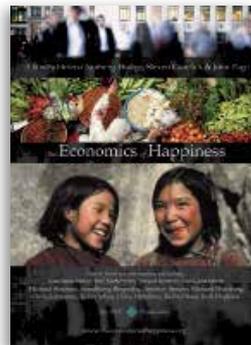


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