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'Gasland' documentary fuels debate over natural gas extraction

By Andrew Maykuth

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John Hanger might think twice the next time a documentary filmmaker knocks on his door in the state capital.

In a documentary about natural gas development that premiered this week on HBO, Pennsylvania's secretary of the environment receives a decidedly unflattering portrayal at the hands of Josh Fox, who made the movie *Gasland*.

Fox portrays Hanger - a liberal who spent years in the mainstream environmental movement - as an equivocating tool of the natural gas industry. In one of the film's signature moments, Fox pulls out a bottle of water he says was polluted by a Marcellus Shale gas well and challenges the state's top environmental regulator to drink it.

A clearly uncomfortable Hanger declines. At the end of the interview - Hanger appears for five minutes of the 105-minute film - the secretary detaches the microphone from his lapel and walks out of *his own* office.

In an interview with The Inquirer on Wednesday, Hanger was harshly critical of Fox, whom he called a "propagandist."

Hanger dismissed *Gasland*, which won a Sundance Film Festival award, as "fundamentally dishonest" and "a deliberately false presentation for dramatic effect."

Fox, contacted in New York on Wednesday during a promotional tour, shot back: "It's John Hanger himself who's dishonest." He said the secretary was disingenuous to present natural gas development "as anything other than a disaster."

The flap encapsulates much of the polarizing debate that has erupted around shale-gas drilling, which relies upon a controversial technique known as hydraulic fracturing.

Fox became interested in gas drilling early last year when an operator offered his family nearly \$100,000 to lease its 19 acres in northeastern Pennsylvania, in the heart of the booming Marcellus Shale natural gas play. Fox sets out on a mission to expose the evils of natural gas.

Critics say Fox, who stars in his own movie in the style of Michael Moore, presents a one-sided portrait of natural gas extraction. Energy in Depth, an industry website, called *Gasland* "heavy on hyperbole, light on facts."

But Fox's devastating portrayals of polluted wells, sickened landowners, befouled streams, dead livestock, and evasive industry executives have become a rallying cry for anti-drilling activists, who have shown the film at fund-raisers.

The most memorable shot - shown Monday on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* - depicts a laughing Fox and a rural Colorado man setting the water from the man's kitchen faucet on fire. Natural gas had migrated into his well water.

Fox blames the incident on hydraulic fracturing. The industry, in its rebuttal, cited Colorado regulatory reports that the flaming faucet was unrelated to gas-well development. It called the gas seepage "biogenic" - naturally occurring.

Such explanations infuriate Fox, who told Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* that the industry was trying to "smear" the film.

"With a straight face, they can come out and say, 'This is not a problem,' " Fox said.

The industry's problems with the film are legion. Fox says gas drilling is unregulated; the industry says it must comply with a host of federal and state laws.

Fox says the source of all problems is hydraulic fracturing, a process that involves the high-pressure injections of water, sand, and chemicals into a well to crack the shale formation to release natural gas molecules.

The industry's position is that hydraulic fracturing has been employed for 60 years, and that there are no proven cases where the fluids migrated from the deep-fractured shale formations into groundwater. But it plays down cases where fluids are spilled on the surface, and other environmental problems.

The current point-counterpoint debate is endless, and, in many ways, it is less about the science than it is about two incompatible worldviews - the industry's desire to explore for energy vs. activists upset about the introduction of a disruptive industrial process into rural landscapes.

"It's unfortunate that the attitude is to attack the film, which is portraying the industry accurately," Fox said.

Fox insists the movie "is not partisan," though visitors to the *Gasland* website are greeted by pleas to support anti-drilling causes.

Hanger's supporters say *Gasland* unfairly portrays a state official who has successfully sought stricter regulation on gas drilling over the industry's strenuous objections.

"The bottom-line message is, look at his record with the industry up until now," said Jan Jarrett, who replaced Hanger in 2008 as head of the environmental group Citizens for Pennsylvania's Future (PennFuture).

The wounded Hanger says he is no gas-drilling apologist.

"There are real problems in this industry," he said. "But this movie certainly contributes to more public misunderstanding."


He was one of the few regulators who agreed to be filmed by Fox.

"I'm a public official, and I'm accessible," he said. "Mr. Fox has shown what he's really about. Would I do a second interview with him? Probably not."

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