

Cuomo wants 'the facts' before moving forward on natural gas drilling

Anti-drilling protesters greet gubernatorial candidate in Binghamton

By Jon Campbell • jcampbell1@gannett.com • August 4, 2010, 10:30 pm

BINGHAMTON -- About 50 people gathered outside the State Office Building Wednesday, demanding answers from Attorney General and Democratic gubernatorial candidate Andrew Cuomo on where he stands on drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale formation.

They left unsatisfied.

Cuomo was in town to announce an investigation into predatory health care [lenders](#) and finances, of which his office has received numerous complaints as the economy turned sour.

The protesters, however, were more interested in the Attorney General's take on one of the biggest issues in the Southern Tier. Cuomo's appearance came the day after the state [Senate](#) passed a bill that would place a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing until May 15, 2011.



Afton resident and an opponent of drilling for natural gas Kim Michels, left, gets a short audience with New York State Attorney General Andrew Cuomo following a press conference Wednesday afternoon at the State Office Building in Binghamton. (DIOGENES AGCAOILI JR. / Staff Photo)

The state has already put high-volume hydraulic fracturing -- a practice in which a mix of water, sand and chemicals are blasted deep underground to break up the shale and release natural gas -- on hold as the [state Department](#) of Environmental Conservation reviews its regulations on the process. The DEC is expected to release those regulations -- known as the supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement (sGEIS) -- by the end of the year.

"Andrew Cuomo has not taken a sufficiently strong position on this matter," said Walter Hang, an Ithaca database specialist who organized the impromptu rally. "We want him to withdraw the draft sGEIS. We want him to do more than say it ought to be studied before it happens. We want him to come back to the (Southern Tier), meet with citizens, and talk with them about their concerns."

Speaking after the press conference, Cuomo told reporters he believes gas drilling can be practiced safely, but said the state shouldn't move forward until it "knows all of the facts."

"I think, on the hydro-fracking issue, there is a potential for economic development for the Southern Tier of New York, and that has a lot of people excited," Cuomo said. "This state needs jobs desperately, and getting jobs back to the state, getting the economy running, is very, very important. At the same time, we want to make sure that whatever we do we do it safely, we do it efficiently, we do it effectively."

Cuomo did not offer his position on the Senate bill because there "is a possibility for lawsuits" and he wants "to be careful about offering a personal opinion that may conflict with a legal opinion," he said. He did say, however, that he "agrees with the concept of moratorium."

"Let me say this: Before we drill, should we make sure we are doing it safely? Yes. That's what they mean by moratorium," Cuomo said. "Moratorium by May? I don't know if May is the right date. May may be too early. May may be too late. That's why they call it May."

That wasn't enough for Kim Michels, an Afton resident who was one of seven protesters who went inside for the press conference, anti-fracking signs in hand. Michels approached Cuomo after the event and asked for his position on the Senate moratorium.

"He didn't exactly give me an answer," she said. "I think if he was for it, he would have said so. But I sort of got a wishy-washy answer from him, and I told him how I felt about (the bill)."

Hang said his team of protesters will be keeping a close eye on Cuomo.

"We're going to bird-dog this candidate in every community where he shows his face," Hang said. "We're going to write him very respectfully, because the (Attorney General's Office) has a long history of protecting the citizens from drilling problems."