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Fracking opponents want broad health probe

Call for transparency, more public input

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ALBANY — Environmental groups and elected officials opposed to hydraulic fracturing urged the state Monday to expand its health review of the controversial drilling technique.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation last week filed for a 90-day extension for its hydrofracking regulations.

In mid-November, the state selected three experts to review the regulations for any public-health impacts.

Critics said Monday that the health review needs further transparency and public input.

"We're appalled at the way this process has gone forward," Binghamton Mayor Matthew T. Ryan said at a news conference at the Capitol. "The most important part of this whole thing is the public health, and it's almost like it's an afterthought."

The group called for Gov. Andrew Cuomo to provide more details about the health review, which is being overseen by the state Health Department and its commissioner, Dr. Nirav Shah. They want a 30-day public comment period for the health review and for its scope to be expanded.

"The public has no idea how the review is being undertaken and has

See **REVIEW**, Page 4A

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Walter Hang, president of an Ithaca-based environmental database firm, Toxics Targeting, shows photos that he says illustrates pollution from hydraulic fracturing.

JESSICA BAKEMAN / STAFF PHOTO

Review

Continued from Page 1A

never been afforded an opportunity to review and comment on it," said Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, D-Ithaca. "The time allocated for the review is ludicrously short and obviously inadequate."

The DEC said in a statement Friday that hydrofracking would not move forward unless it was deemed safe. It also won't happen until the health review is finished.

"DEC will not take any final action or make any decision regarding hydraulic fracturing until after Dr. Shah's health review is completed and DEC, through the environmental impact statement, is satisfied that this activity can be done safely in New York state," DEC spokeswoman Emily DeSantis said in a statement.

Hydrofracking opponents raised concerns that the health review might be short. The contract with the three academic professionals runs through Feb. 13, but one of the experts told Gannett's Albany Bureau last month that the work was to be finished by Monday.

"The public is being exposed to gas and oil pollution. No one knows what their health concerns are," said Walter Hang, president of an Ithaca-based environmental database firm, Toxics



Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, D-Ithaca, discusses her concerns about hydrofracking Monday at the state Capitol. JESSICA BAKEMAN / STAFF PHOTO

Targeting. "No one has ever investigated it thoroughly, and that's how come this Department of Health review has to be comprehensive."

Pro-drilling groups said they are comfortable with the ongoing review and that the process can be done safely. They have argued that hydrofracking would be a boon to the economy of the struggling Southern Tier.

The newly proposed

regulations will be open to public comment from Dec. 12 through Jan. 11.

High-volume hydrofracking hasn't been allowed in New York. The Southern Tier sits above the gas-rich Marcellus Shale.

The environmental review was launched more than four years ago.

The Independent Oil & Gas Association said it has some concerns about the new regulations,

which were released Friday. But overall, the group said it hopes the regulatory review is nearing the end.

"We are pleased that there is progress toward ending the four-plus-year delay. Only time will tell how oil and natural gas producers will now view New York compared to other states," said Brad Gill, the gas industry group's executive director, in a statement Friday.