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Strong positions on either side of "fracking" at EPA hearing

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BINGHAMTON, N.Y. - Armed with placards and clever slogans, hundreds of supporters and opponents of natural-gas drilling descended here Monday in a passionate display of just how fractious the process known as hydraulic fracturing has become.

Wearing shirts that urged policymakers to "Pass Gas Now," supporters of Marcellus Shale drilling faced off peacefully with activists who announced their opposition to hydraulic fracturing with chants of "Frack, No!"

The occasion was the first of two public sessions conducted Monday by the Environmental Protection Agency to gather public comment on its study of hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," a technique for unlocking natural gas from rock formations thousands of feet underground with high-pressure injections of water, chemicals, and sand.

Anti-drilling activists hope the EPA's study of hydro-fracking will prove it is an environmental danger that should be federally regulated, if not banned. The practice is currently regulated by states' oil- and gas-drilling laws.

"Everywhere this drilling is practiced is at grave risk," said James Barth, of Damascus Citizens for Sustainability, a Pennsylvania anti-drilling group.

The gas industry and its supporters said the EPA study could inspire restrictions that might impair an industry that is one of the few economic bright spots in Pennsylvania and surrounding states.

"Now is especially not the time to further limit energy-job opportunities for those in need," testified John E. Harmon, of the African American Chamber of Commerce.

Two more sessions will be held Wednesday in this city 60 miles north of Scranton, the last of four locations where the EPA has had hearings in recent months.

The agency says public input will help it determine the scope of its study, expected to be finished in about two years. Regional administrator Judith Enck said the EPA was seeking suggestions "about the design of the study, not about the merits of hydraulic fracturing."

But that did not stop impassioned speakers from offering their opinions, which were joyously applauded in the cavernous Broome County Forum Theater.

Nearly all urged the EPA to base its study on science, rather than emotion or political pressure - as long as it was the science that supported their position.

Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D., N.Y.), a drilling opponent who campaigned for the new EPA study, called fracking an "unconventional, harm-causing drilling technique" that has been linked to "numerous reports of water contamination" nationwide.

He denounced a 2004 EPA examination that concluded hydraulic fracturing posed no risk. That study examined fracturing for natural gas in coal seams, which is conducted at shallower geologic depth and theoretically should pose more environmental risk than drilling in the Marcellus Shale, which is located a mile deeper than groundwater sources.

"Fortunately, now we have a new EPA which understands things a lot more clearly and is being more honest and open about this process," Hinchey said.

But gas-drilling advocates repeated their argument that there are no documented cases in which the hydraulic-fracturing process has contaminated groundwater - and that numerous studies have said there is little chance for contaminated fluids to escape from a properly constructed natural-gas well.

"A Hollywood actor holding a glass of cloudy water proves nothing except that fear-mongering and emotion will always trump science and logic," said Brad Gill, executive director of the Independent Oil and Gas Association of New York State.

Gill said that 14,000 of the 75,000 wells drilled in New York in the last two centuries were still producing, and that many of them were hydraulically fractured. But New York currently has a de facto moratorium on fracking while the state Department of Environmental Conservation studies new drilling regulations.

"Billions of dollars in economic impact to New York and its citizens is at stake here," he said. "The positive impact is staggering, but it doesn't

come at the expense of environmental protection."

Opposition to drilling in New York is strongest in the Delaware and Hudson River watersheds, which provide New York City with its unfiltered drinking water.

But public sentiment in New York's southern tier is mixed. This economically depressed region lies across the border from Pennsylvania's most productive Marcellus areas, which are also the scene of several dramatic cases where drilling activity - though not necessarily hydraulic fracturing - caused contamination.

Broome County Executive Barbara Fiala declared fracking "safe" and expressed frustration with the slow pace of development in New York. "All we ask is that this study be focused and not take forever to complete," she said.

Binghamton Mayor Matthew Ryan urged regulators to take their time and examine not just fracking, but all aspects of gas drilling. "To date," he said, "I have heard only one refrain from those who want to speed up the gas play: We need the money."

Outside, where the street drama was taking place - police kept the rivals separated by barricades - land owners such as Chris Ostrowsky expressed exasperation that Pennsylvanians a few miles away in Susquehanna County were striking it rich, while New Yorkers were in limbo.

Last week, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection released its first detailed Marcellus production figures. Susquehanna and Bradford Counties accounted for 55 percent of the 179 billion cubic feet of Marcellus gas produced in the year ending June 30, a Powell Barnett Shale Newsletter analysis says.

"It's real frustrating to see what's going on across the border, how the economy is booming in Pennsylvania," Ostrowsky said.

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