

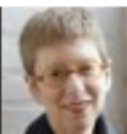
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# President Obama to be Greeted by Anti-Fracking Protesters

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By Karen DeWitt : NYS Public Radio/WXXI

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Activist Bill McKibben protests against fracking in Albany. (Karen DeWitt/WXXI)

President Obama is planning on visiting upstate New York this week to promote an education plan. But whenever a major politician visits the region, the issue of fracking is often on the agenda, whether they like it or not.

President Obama's planned trip to Buffalo, Syracuse and Binghamton will focus on the importance of getting an affordable college education.

But activists opposed to hydrofracking want the topic of natural gas drilling to be on the agenda as well.

"We're going to be present in Binghamton by the hundreds if not the thousands," says Walter Hang, with the Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting.

Hang says protesters are expected at the President's other stops as well, but the Southern Tier, which is at the epicenter of the gas drilling debate, will feature the largest demonstration.

"It would be irresponsible to permit shale fracking anywhere in New York without comprehensive public health protections or liability standards," Hang said.

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Another anti-fracking group, Frack Action, is calling for volunteers to attend the protests on its Facebook page.

While Obama is pro-fracking, and has promoted gas drilling in his State of the Union message, many New York politicians oppose fracking, and the state has had a defacto five-year moratorium on drilling.

Gov. Mario Cuomo has said he's neutral on the issue, but his Health Commissioner has been delaying the release of a health study for nearly a year.

Karen Moreau, with the Petroleum Institute, said that Governor Cuomo should listen to President Obama when it comes to fracking. She said there's a connection between achieving good education and strengthening the middle class, which the President will speak about, and advancing fracking in economically-troubled upstate regions.

"That's very, very relevant," said Moreau, who said the jobs created by the gas drilling industry are "high paying jobs" in the vocational trades. She said welders, who are in short supply in neighboring Pennsylvania where fracking is prevalent, are making up to \$6,000 a week.

President Obama is also planning to stop in Northeast Pennsylvania, and Moreau predicted he will see a big difference in the two states' economic statuses.

"In Pennsylvania, what they would see is an area that was once like Appalachia, with no middle class at all, reborn," Moreau said.

Moreau said that in Pennsylvania, many community colleges have developed programs to train skilled workers for the gas drilling industry, who are almost guaranteed good jobs.

Hang conceded there would be jobs created from hydrofracking, but he said they would come at the cost of potentially dangerous pollution, something Moreau denied. "I'm personally not against natural gas," Hang said. "I'm against pollution."

Cuomo and Obama might not get to discuss their views of hydrofracking, higher education, or anything at all. Cuomo, in an interview with public TV's New York Now, was asked whether he planned to travel with the President. His answer was noncommittal.

"It's always a delight to see him," Cuomo said. "However I can help, I'd like to help, but it's always a pleasure to see him."

If Cuomo does decide to accompany the President, Hang, with Toxics Targeting, says the demonstrators will also direct their anti-fracking message to Governor Cuomo. Hang says they will give Cuomo a preview what he says the governor's 2014 re election campaign could look like, with protesters at every stop.

Even if Cuomo skips the trip with the President, anti-fracking groups are already planning an event at the State Fair on Thursday, for Governor's Day, where Cuomo has regularly appeared in the past.

As for when New York State will decide whether or not to frack, Cuomo has said there is no timetable, and that he's still waiting for the completion of the health study.