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NATURAL GAS

As Obama Visits Upstate New York, the Fracking Debate Takes Center Stage

While the President might want to talk education on his visit to upstate New York, there will be no escaping the war over fracking

By Bryan Walsh @bryanrwalsh | Aug. 22, 2013 | 8 Comments

President Obama is planning to tout his education plan when he visits upstate New York this week, beginning with an appearance in Buffalo today—but much of his audience is likely to be interested in only one subject: fracking. Obama has, for the most part, been in favor of using fracking—more properly known as hydraulic fracturing—to exploit the country’s huge resources of shale natural gas. In his 2012 State of the Union speech, Obama [pledged](#) to “take every possible action to safely develop” natural gas, promising that shale gas would add hundreds of thousands of jobs to the economy. And he’s been true to his word—the U.S. produced in 2012 [8.13 trillion cubic ft. of natural gas](#) from shale deposits, which requires fracking, nearly double the total from 2010, and the Energy Information Administration projects that by 2030 that figure could pass 14 trillion cubic ft. While the Environmental Protection Agency and the Interior Department [are working on](#) possibly stronger new national regulations of fracking, for the most part the natural gas industry has had its way under Obama. He may not have intended it when he entered the White House in 2009, but Obama really has been America’s “[driller-in-chief](#).”



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Activists protest fracking in New York state in 2012. Governor Andrew Cuomo has yet to make a decision on allowing fracking

That’s exactly why protesters are likely to be out in force tomorrow in Buffalo, and even more so when Obama continues his visit to Binghamton, NY. Fracking remains controversial throughout the U.S., thanks to [concerns](#) over potential water contamination and pollution from wells, as well as fears that the new supplies of natural gas [will bind the country](#) more permanently to carbon-heavy

fossil fuels. Ground zero for that emotional debate is New York state, which has both a massive [potential reserve](#) of shale gas and a [determined community](#) of environmentalists and activists working to ensure that fracking never happens in the Empire State. [“We’re going to be present in Binghamton by the hundreds, if not the thousands,”](#) Walter Hang, the head of Ithaca-based Toxic Targeting, [told WNYC](#).

(MORE: [The War Over Fracking Comes to the English Countryside](#))

In New York so far, environmentalists have been winning. For the past five years, the state has had a de-facto moratorium on fracking, while New York’s Department of Environmental Conservation has carried out an [extended review](#) of the impacts of hydraulic fracturing, and more recently as New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s health commissioner, Nirav Shah, [reviews](#) the health effects of fracking. There’s no word of when that will end—Shah [told reporters back in May](#) that a recommendation on fracking could be issued within weeks, but that has yet to come. While just across the border, drillers in Pennsylvania [produced](#) 1.5 trillion cubic ft. of natural gas using fracking through the first half of 2013, fracking is still on hold in New York as Cuomo makes up his mind.

Unlike Obama, the governor has said he’s neutral on fracking, but it won’t escape notice that Cuomo won’t be accompanying Obama to Binghamton on Friday, a town at the heart of the fracking debate in New York. (Binghamton enacted a municipal moratorium on fracking—one of a number of New York towns to do so—though the ban was struck down by a state Supreme Court justice [last year](#).) Earlier this week Cuomo [told](#) The Capitol Pressroom, a public-radio program, that the President’s “point that fracking has economic benefits, energy benefits for this country—that’s inarguable.” But he questioned the environmental cost of the rush to shale gas:

Every area that has participated in fracking will tell you that it’s increased commercial activity and it has an economic boost effect. The question is: Is there a cost to the environment, et cetera? And that’s what has to be assessed and that’s what has to be weighed and that’s what we’re going through now.

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So fracking will remain in limbo in New York, much to the consternation of the gas industry and upstate residents who [want to make money](#) off drilling on their land. Last week Reuters [reported](#) that Chesapeake Energy, one of the biggest players in the shale gas industry, was willing to walk away from disputes leases in New York, in part due to frustration over the slow pace of regulation. The New York public seems to be largely split on fracking—the Siena Research Institute [reported in a poll](#) on Aug. 29 that support for approval of fracking was at 41%, while opposition was at 42%. But they do tend to be passionate—just 12% of respondents said they had no opinion, almost half the number from last fall.

Cuomo will be up for re-election in 2014, and there’s been talk that he could run for the White House in 2016. The fracking debate puts him in a difficult spot. Supporting natural gas could help him appeal to conservatives who tend to want to see more drilling for domestic gas and oil. But environmentalists, especially in New York, have made fracking a red line—and as Obama will likely see in Buffalo and Binghamton, they’re not shy about letting politicians know what they’re feeling. New York, much more so than other states where fracking has already gone forward, has a [motivated, wealthy and well-connected opposition](#) to fracking. Approving fracking could well hurt Cuomo in 2014 and in a Democratic presidential primary in 2016, where there will be added pressure on candidates to take strong stands on climate change and the environment. But denying it could be harmful in a general election—as Obama has shown, even a Democratic President usually needs to be seen supporting domestic energy, including oil and natural gas

So maybe it’s not surprising that Cuomo seems to be taking the maximum amount of time to make up his mind—he could lose politically no matter what he does. Obama can relate—his [decision-making process](#) on the controversial Keystone XL oil sands

pipeline has been drawn out for much the same reason. Still, while Cuomo might be able to dodge the fracking debate this week, he'll have to make a decision eventually. And no matter what Cuomo decides, he's going to have to deal with some very unhappy New Yorkers.

(MORE: [Carbon Regulations and Keystone Silence: Previewing Obama's Climate Speech](#))



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