EPA told gas drilling does, does not taint water

September 13 2010, By MARY ESCH , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Rep. Maurice Hinchey told a federal hearing Monday that the Environmental Protection Agency must regulate hydraulic fracturing, the natural gas extraction process that he said has contaminated water near drilling sites around the country.

"There are numerous reports of water contamination related to hydraulic fracturing in states across the country," said Hinchey, D-N.Y. "Despite the fact that EPA is, in many ways, precluded from taking regulatory action in response to these reports, I believe EPA must investigate to understand what is being done - to keep water supplies safe and secure."

The process, also known as fracking, blasts millions of gallons of water mixed with sand and chemicals, some of them carcinogens, deep into the earth to free gas from dense shale deposits. As a gas rush sweeps parts of the vast and lucrative Marcellus Shale region that underlies New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia, environmentalists are concerned for the watershed that provides drinking water for 17 million people from Philadelphia to New York City.

Environmentalists fear the process, which leaves as much as 90 percent of the post-fracking water known as "produced water" deep underground, will irreversibly taint aquifers.

No water supplies have been poisoned by fracking, the petroleum industry says, and the process - which promises lucrative industry profits and thousands of jobs in economically depressed areas - is safe.

"Billions of dollars in economic impact on New York and its citizens is at stake here," said Brad Gill of the Independent Oil and Gas Association, with drilling promising more than 60,000 jobs in New York alone. "The positive impact is staggering but it doesn't come at the expense of environmental protection."

John Harmon of the New York-New Jersey African American Chamber of Commerce said full development of the Marcellus Shale would create 280,000 jobs over the next 10 years, jobs sorely needed in the black community

"This is not the time to further limit energy job opportunities for those in need," Harmon said

Congress has ordered EPA to conduct a new fracking study and EPA is considering how broadly to construct it, since the agency's 2004 study that declared the technology safe was widely criticized as flawed. The earlier study had enabled passage of 2005 energy legislation exempting fracking from federal regulation under the Safe Drinking Water Act, leaving regulation to individual states.

"The EPA must do all it can to insure that its scientists and researchers are not influenced by industry or by politics as they were influenced back in 2004," Hinchey said, "so that the public can be assured that this study is being carried out in the public interest."

Hinchey is one of the authors of the so-called FRAC Act in Congress, which would put fracking under EPA regulation.

The petroleum industry is strongly opposed to federal regulation - which it says would be more costly than complying with adequate state rules.

Gill said "strict state regulations" for decades have governed fracking

and the industry has "a stellar environmental record" to show for it.

In New York, he said, there are about 14,000 producing natural gas wells, thousands of which were begun by the fracking process. New York has not seen one case of groundwater contamination by fracking fluids, he said.

"A Hollywood actor holding a glass of cloudy water proves nothing except that fear-mongering and emotion will always trump science and logic," he said, taking aim at the recent critical TV documentary "Gasland," by Josh Fox.

The Marcellus rush is barely two years old in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, where thousands of wells have been fracked. Some geologists estimate the Marcellus contains more than 500 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, of which fracking could recover 50 trillion cubic feet - enough to supply the entire East Coast for 50 years. The proximity of the gas stores to the large East Coast energy market makes it particularly valuable.

Hundreds of people on both sides gathered for the last of four public hearings on a pending EPA study of fracking. The Binghamton hearings, twice postponed because of anticipated large crowds, are split into double sessions on Monday and again on Wednesday.

"Kids can't drink gas" and "Protect our water. Stop fracking America," were some of the signs carried by opponents. Supporters, including union workers eager for jobs, carried signs that said "Yes to science, no to paranoia" and chanted "Pass gas now!"

New York's Department of Environmental Conservation has halted issuing drilling permits until it draws regulations to govern the process. Complaints of wellwater contamination and surface spills of post-

fracking water have forced revision of state rules in Pennsylvania, where more than 1,600 wells have already been drilled in the Marcellus Shale and more than 4,000 permits have been granted.

Drilling companies have used fracking to release natural gas from other shale reserves around the country. EPA earlier held hearings in Colorado, Texas and Pennsylvania.

Paul Rush of New York City's Department of Environmental Protection noted that half the state's population, residing in New York City and its environs, depend on unfiltered water from the Catskills-Delaware watershed that is in the Marcellus Shale region. Two DEP studies showed serious risks to the watershed if gas drilling is allowed there. He urged the EPA to read the studies posted on the DEP's website.

"There's no way this can be done safely. It will toxify the air, water and soil," said protester Kathy Shimberg, 73, of Mount Vision, N.Y., wearing a T-shirt that read "Love N.Y.? Don't frack it up."

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