

EPA holding upstate NY hearings on gas drilling

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(AP) -- Hundreds of people are gathering outside a theater in Binghamton, N.Y., ahead of what is expected to be a pair of contentious public hearings on a federal study of a natural gas-drilling technique.

People opposed to hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," have signs saying "Kids can't drink gas," while those supporting the method are chanting "Pass gas now!"

The Environmental Protection Agency is holding four-hour hearings at The Forum in Binghamton beginning at noon and again at 6 p.m. Two more sessions are scheduled for Wednesday.

The EPA is taking comment on how broadly to construct its study of fracking. The drilling technique involves blasting chemical-laced water into the ground to release natural gas from rock formations thousands of feet underground.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. Check back soon for further information. AP's earlier story is below.

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) - The oil and gas industry is urging the Environmental Protection Agency to keep a narrow focus in its study of how a drilling technique that involves blasting chemical-laced water into the ground may affect drinking water - while environmental groups want the study to cover everything from road-building to waste disposal.

The issues will be aired Monday in two-minute speaking slots at an EPA hearing twice postponed last month because of security concerns over rallies and crowds anticipated in the thousands.

The hearing, the last of four around the country, will be held in two sessions on Monday and two more on Wednesday at The Forum in Binghamton, 115 miles southwest of Albany. The EPA is taking comment on how broadly to construct its study of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a technique for releasing natural gas from rock formations thousands of feet underground by injecting at high pressure millions of gallons of water mixed with chemicals and sand.

Congress directed the EPA to take a new look at fracking as gas drillers swarm to the lucrative Marcellus Shale region beneath Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia and Ohio and other shale reserves around the country. Concerns that the process can poison private wells and water aquifers have driven opposition, while the industry insists there's no evidence linking fracking to any contaminated water sources.

In Wyoming, which also has large shale reserves, the EPA has told residents in Pavillion, a farming and ranching area, not to drink water from about 40 nearby wells. Residents speculate their water supplies have been polluted by fracking, but the EPA's tests have been inconclusive.

Just last week, the EPA asked nine major gas drilling companies, including Halliburton Co., Key Energy Services Inc. and Schlumberger Ltd., to voluntarily disclose the chemicals used in fracking. Drilling companies, calling their chemical formulas proprietary, have largely sought to avoid that disclosure. Others that received information requests from the EPA include BJ Services Co., Complete Production Services Inc., Patterson-UTI Energy Inc., RPC Inc., Superior Well Services Inc. and Weatherford International Ltd.

Fracking is specifically excluded from regulation under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, in part because of a widely quoted 2004 EPA study that concluded the process posed no threat to drinking water sources. That study was widely criticized for, among other things, its narrow focus on coalbed methane deposits and its lack of independent field studies.

Environmental groups hope the new EPA study will validate their position that there are many risks that need to be addressed by regulators at the federal level. Beyond the fracking process itself, concerns have risen from environmentalists over the long-distance hauling, treatment and disposal of the resulting wastewater.

"We want the new study to be free of political and special-interest influence and based on science," said Craig Michaels, watershed program director for Riverkeeper, an environmental group whose stated mission includes safeguarding the drinking water supply of New York City and the lower Hudson Valley. "We want it to look not only at the fracturing of the well but the whole life cycle of drilling operations from road building to waste disposal and everything in between."

Gas drilling advocates oppose taking a broad view.

"Congress asked the EPA to look at a specific thing, which was the potential impact of hydraulic fracturing on drinking water sources," said Stephanie Meadows, a senior policy adviser of the American Petroleum Institute. "That's where the focus and the limited dollars that EPA has been given to do this should remain."

Industry groups oppose having fracking regulated at the federal level, which API acknowledges would be more costly.

"We don't see the need for another level of oversight," Meadows said.

"States have the authority to regulate this and have been doing that effectively for the last 60 years."

Even if the EPA study doesn't lead to new federal regulations, the information gathered will help states improve their own regulations, said Katherine Nadeau, a program director of Environmental Advocates, an Albany group that says it tries to protect air, land, water and wildlife and the health of all New Yorkers.

"That's why it's so important that they be as thorough as possible," said Nadeau, whose group is urging the EPA to look at the impact of natural gas exploration on air quality, communities, ecosystems and waterways as well as on drinking water. "We would be able to use the scientific results from these studies to set up better water and community protections here in New York as well as nationwide."

The Natural Resources Defense Council, which says it combines the grass roots power of 1.3 million members with the expertise of more than 350 lawyers, scientists and other professionals, is urging the EPA to conduct numerous field studies in communities where known or suspected water contamination has been reported, such as Washington and Bradford counties in Pennsylvania.

NRDC senior attorney Kate Sinding said she would speak Monday about the need to do mapping studies of rock formations before and after fracking occurs to evaluate the potential for migration of contaminants through new and existing cracks.

Groups representing New York landowners with gas leases, frustrated by the slow pace of a Department of Environmental Conservation review of issues surrounding natural gas exploration in the Marcellus Shale region, want the EPA to keep its study narrow and finish it quickly.

The DEC has had permit approvals on hold since it started its review in July 2008, and some politicians and environmental groups want permitting further held up until the EPA study is complete.

"The hidden agenda of environmental groups is to delay it as long as possible," said Noel van Swol, president of the Sullivan-Delaware Property Owners Association. "This is all-class warfare on the part of weekenders and Hollywood types from New York City who want to keep this area as their playground and drive out those of us who have lived here all their lives."

He called the natural gas industry "the last best hope for this region," where jobs are in short supply and farms are struggling to survive.

The industry contends gas drilling has already brought millions of dollars in tax benefits and thousands of jobs - with promises of thousands more - in the vast Marcellus Shale region. Geologists say the Marcellus could become the nation's largest natural gas field.

Michaels said Riverkeeper would present the EPA with a report that documents "significant environmental impacts from natural gas drilling, including hydraulic fracturing."

"I'm not sure there's any form of energy production that's completely risk-free," Michaels said. "But people are realizing that they're being exposed to dangers that they shouldn't be. People shouldn't have to sacrifice clean air and water for a clean energy supply."

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