

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Drilling forecasts decades of growth, Pittsburgh City Council told

By Andrew Conte

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, July 13, 2010

The Marcellus shale gas industry in Pennsylvania could be on the verge of decades of growth harkening to the introduction of automobiles in Detroit a century ago, an expert told Pittsburgh City Council Monday.

The vast field of natural gas more than a mile deep has brought thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in investment, industry experts said, but that growth comes with risks of environmental damage and disasters.

"It is both an opportunity and a challenge for Pennsylvania," Rep. David Levdansky, D-Forward Township, testified. "It's an opportunity because if it's done correctly, it can promote economic development. ... It's also a challenge: How do we do this in a way to protect the environment and reduce impacts on surrounding communities?"

About 100 people attended the three-hour council hearing, including a group of women from Lincoln Place wearing T-shirts opposing drilling in the city.

Separately today, the Department of Environmental Protection plans to release its findings into the June 3 blowout at a Clearfield County well that released natural gas and wastewater. The Pennsylvania Environmental Council is expected to issue a separate report urging regulations and greater oversight of drilling and extraction of gas from the shale formation.

Council members said they are concerned about whether drilling can be done safely, and whether the public will get its share of wealth generated. The pocket of gas stretching from Tennessee to New York could be worth as much as \$1.2 trillion and could meet the country's natural gas needs for 15 to 20 years, according to some estimates.

Industry spokeswoman Kathryn Klaber, president of the Marcellus Shale Coalition trade group, said Marcellus shale drilling in Pennsylvania generated \$389 million in state and local taxes last year and created thousands of jobs over five years. She said companies looking at drilling in the city have not decided whether to proceed.

"There is obviously a huge opportunity in front of us. ... But that comes with huge responsibility," Klaber said.

With the industry's aggressive plans, Pennsylvania could end up with 80,000 Marcellus shale wells, including more than 1,400 in Pittsburgh, said Chuck Christen, operations director for the University of Pittsburgh's Center for

Healthy Environments and Communities. No one has conducted enough independent research to determine whether that amount of drilling can be done safely, he said.

Pennsylvania has granted about 3,800 Marcellus shale drilling permits since 2005, almost half of them this year, state Department of Environmental Protection records show.

"If they want to develop gas in the way they've been talking about, it's going to take a lot of wells," Christen said.

To free the gas, drilling companies shoot 2 million to 5 million gallons of water, sand and chemicals underground in a process called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. That water, which carries salt and heavy metals, presents a potential environmental hazard as it surfaces during the life of the well, said Radislav Vidic, a Pitt environmental engineering professor.

Other potential hazards include everything from noise and truck traffic to an explosion or release of hazardous materials, Christen said. One question is whether casings to separate wells from groundwater and underground pockets of methane gas will withstand time.

"My concern is, how does an industry like this come into an urban area that has all these people?" said Councilwoman Darlene Harris.

Andrew Conte can be reached at andrewconte@tribweb.com or 412-320-7835.

Images and text copyright © 2010 by Trib Total Media, Inc.
Reproduction or reuse prohibited without written consent.