The New York Times
Green
A Blog About Energy and the Environment

AUGUST 19, 2011, 11:30 AM

Fracking Oversight Raises Staffing Questions

By ***MIREYA NAVARRO***

A panel charged with advising New York officials on regulating a controversial form of natural gas extraction known as hydrofracking will first examine whether the state government has enough staff members to properly monitor and enforce new drilling regulations.

The panel of business, environmental and government representatives met for the first time on Thursday, with 15 of its 17 members gathering in Albany or taking part via videoconference. The goal was to lay out the groundwork and a timeline for making recommendations in several areas. Those include ensuring that the state has adequate resources to monitor drilling in the natural gas field known as the Marcellus Shale and minimizing any adverse impact on upstate communities where thousands of new wells are expected to be drilled.

The extraction method combines hydraulic fracturing with horizontal drilling and involves injecting vast amounts of water and chemicals into the shale. Critics say the method poses the risk of contaminating groundwater supplies.

One panel member, Eric Goldstein, a lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, said that the state agency to which the panel reports, the Department of Environmental Conservation, would need to reverse a pattern of staff cuts in recent years to oversee the new drilling properly.

“To have any kind of gas drilling program with the safeguards that the state believes are necessary is going to be quite expensive,” he said.

The advisory panel’s members did not discuss specific numbers, But Robert Moore, executive director of the Environmental Advocates of New York, said, “The D.E.C.’s budget is going to have to grow by an enormous amount in order to do this job.”

The state environmental department’s commissioner, Joe Martens, who led the panel’s meeting, issued a statement saying he expected its first recommendations by November. His department plans to release its full draft of proposed rules governing hydrofracking for public comment in the next few weeks.

Mr. Martens has added five additional members to the advisory panel, almost a third of which now consists of environmental watchdogs. The body also now includes a representative of a natural gas industry group, the Independent Oil and Gas Association, and a representative of landowners who are leasing their properties for drilling.

One likely contentious topic will be how to generate revenue to carry out the new drilling regulations. One option that other states are using is a severance tax levied on gas drillers.