

Fracking showdown: Public revved up for chance to vent to EPA

By Jon Campbell • jcampbell1@gannett.com • August 7, 2010, 6:55 pm

VESTAL -- The Binghamton University Events Center has played host to some major touring acts since it opened in 2004, including folk legend Bob Dylan, rapper Ludacris, and popular bands Green Day and the Foo Fighters.

On Thursday, it expects to host a non-traditional group, but one still expected to attract a large crowd: the Environmental Protection Agency.

About 1,200 people have already registered to attend a public meeting on the EPA's study on hydraulic fracturing, according to the agency, with a large walk-up crowd expected to bolster that number. However, as of Saturday evening, a contract between BU and the EPA hadn't been signed, securing the Events Center as the venue for the meeting. A final decision regarding the venue isn't expected to be made until Monday.

Despite that, all 300 speaking slots have been filled for weeks, with a handful reserved for a few lucky participants who will snatch them up on a first-come, first-served basis on Thursday.

Opposing rallies have been organized by environmentalists and the natural gas industry, with people expected to attend from across the Northeast. But the placement of those rallies won't be announced until BU and the EPA agree to a venue.

The Southern Tier has hosted a number of contentious meetings on fracking since the words "Marcellus Shale" entered the region's collective lexicon in 2008, but none quite like this.

All about fracking

Five months ago, the EPA announced it would embark on a multi-million dollar, multi-year study on the effects of hydrofracking, a practice used by natural gas drilling companies in which a mixture of water, sand and chemicals are injected deep underground to break up rock and release the gas.

Industry types say the practice is safe; environmentalists say fracking has the potential to wreak havoc on groundwater.

The study will take an in-depth look at the potential relationship between fracking and drinking water. Previously, the EPA released a report on fracking in 2004, but it was widely panned by critics and environmentalists as being inadequate and a simple survey of existing work.

The current version is still in the planning stage, and researchers at the EPA are hoping to put out a draft plan in September on how to proceed, which would be subject to another round of public comments. The EPA is also considering locations for one or more case studies as part of the larger study.

"The earlier study was on a much narrower scale," said Jeanne Briskin of the EPA's Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water, who will be on hand at Thursday's meeting. "Our study now is going to look broadly at hydraulic fracturing and its potential impact on water resources. We expect there to be more breath and more depth in our work."

The EPA has dedicated \$1.9 million to the study so far, and it plans to ask Congress for additional money in 2011. It will be lengthy; preliminary results aren't expected until 2012, according to the EPA.

While the meeting is getting a lot of attention from

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stakeholders, it doesn't have any bearing on when high-volume fracking in **New York** might take place.

Natural gas companies are eager to drill in the state's portion of the Marcellus Shale, a gas-rich rock formation about a mile underground, but the state put the practice on hold in July 2008 while the Department of Environmental Conservation reviews how the process should be regulated. The DEC review is expected to be completed in 2011, according to the department.

Some, including U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-Hurley, have called on the state to delay drilling until the EPA study is complete. A bill was introduced in the state Legislature that would place a moratorium on fracking until the study is returned, but it was shot down in favor of a compromise bill that would ban the practice until May 15, 2011. The May moratorium passed the state Senate last week, and it is expected to be taken up by the Assembly next month.

Representing a large portion of the Southern Tier, which sits over the Marcellus Shale, and sponsor of a federal bill that would close the natural gas industry's exemption from the Safe Drinking Water Act, Hinchey has a **vested interest** in the proceedings.

"There is some difference of opinion on this," said Hinchey, who urged the EPA to conduct the study. "There are some people that have some property that they would like to get leased quickly and have the drilling occur. But I think that the very strong majority of the population recognizes how important it is to ensure the honesty and accuracy and **safety** of this drilling."

The DEC held a public hearing of its own in November 2009. About 1,000 people crammed into the Chenango Valley High School auditorium for an event that was much like a political rally, with passionate pleas from costumed and sign-wielding speakers generating loud cheers from the polarized audience.

Natural choice

The fact the Binghamton area was even selected to host a meeting is a nod from the feds that the area is a major epicenter for the fracking debate.

"The EPA selected four locations for these meetings, and one of them was Binghamton," said Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, D-Endwell. "I think that speaks for itself."

Lupardo will attend the meeting and submit written testimony, with Hinchey, U.S. Rep. Michael Arcuri, and Binghamton Mayor Matthew Ryan expected to attend.

Other meetings were held in Denver, Fort Worth, Texas, and Canonsburg, Pa.

The Canonsburg meeting on July 22 drew a crowd of 1,200 to the Hilton Garden Inn. Rather than a discussion strictly about the study, it turned into a sometimes loud debate between those for and against fracking.

With a healthy contingent of landowners, industry representatives, and environmentalists expected to be on hand, Thursday's attendees can expect more of the same. The meeting, though, will be longer and is expected to break the Canonsburg attendance mark.

It will be split into three, four-hour sessions, with one-hour breaks in between. The morning session begins at 8 a.m., the afternoon at 1 p.m., and the evening at 6 p.m.

The other three meetings consisted of a single session with about 100 speakers; Thursday's meeting will feature about 300.

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Interest in the meeting caused confusion last week when the EPA said it was told by BU that it was changing the venue from the [Anderson Center](#) for the Performing Arts to a larger gymnasium without air-conditioning, which the agency balked at. After several people intervened, including Hinchey, the meeting was tentatively switched to the Events Center, which holds up to 7,753 for events such as commencement ceremonies.

Briskin, who will sit on a panel for the morning and afternoon sessions, said the locations were carefully selected based on public interest.

"We picked places for our stakeholder meetings that represented places where the public has expressed concern about hydraulic fracturing," Briskin said. "We wanted to go to the places where hydraulic fracturing has taken place or might take place in the future to get input so that we can further investigate the important questions that have been brought to our attention."



Ann Codrington, acting director of the Drinking Water Protection Division of EPA's office of Ground Water and Drinking Water, speaks at a previous EPA hearing. (Photo provided)

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