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Gas companies waging PR battle over Marcellus Shale

By Lauren Daley



A representative from environmental-consulting group TeemCo videotapes protesters for an online newsletter.
Lauren Daley

Probably no amount of public relations would have convinced protesters outside the recent Marcellus Shale Gas Environmental Summit that the natural-gas industry is looking out for the environment. Demonstrators outside the March 28-30 summit at the Renaissance Hotel Downtown were, after all, carrying signs that urged "Stop the toxic invasion," and "Ban fracking now."

Concerns about "fracking" -- a nickname for the hydraulic fracturing process used to extract natural gas from layers of shale rock -- have been serious hurdles for those trying to market the Marcellus Shale industry in Western Pennsylvania.

Things got worse last week, with reports that under Gov. Tom Corbett, only three high-ranking administration officials have the authority to pre-approve permits or issue notices of citations, among other things, for Marcellus Shale gas drilling. The move, which the state's Department of Environmental Protection later said would only be temporary, has generated heavy criticism.

The DEP changes "do not help the industry at all," says former state representative David Levdansky, who sat on the House Energy and Environmental Resources Committee. The gas-drilling industry "clearly wants to build more public support, more public trust and confidence," says Levdansky, a Democrat. "What the DEP has done completely undermines what the industry has done."

What exactly the industry has done in terms of PR, and how effective it's been, is open to debate. Industry experts themselves acknowledge that PR hasn't been a focus of natural-gas drillers.

"We recognize there is a gap and we need to fill that gap with information," Chris Tucker, spokesman for oil and gas industry group Energy in Depth, said at the summit.

The industry needs to get more involved, he added. Drilling companies "never had to engage at the level and degree we see today because of the ... the magnitude and potential resources available."

Two sessions of the summit specifically dealt with handling public criticism -- and as if to illustrate the problem, three protesters burst into a March 29 session with a "bill of indictment" denouncing industry claims about the drilling process. The protesters were escorted out by security.

"They're not giving a voice to the public," argued Elizabeth Donohoe, of Forest Hills.

Indeed, inside the summit were mostly drilling-company representatives, engineers, environmental consultants and suppliers.

When Pennsylvania's shale-gas industry took off locally four years ago, Levdansky says, public relations weren't a priority for drilling companies; neither was disclosure.

"When you start out not being engaged in full disclosure and transparency, that ... frames the public perception right there," Levdansky says. "Changing perception is not as easy as starting out with proper perception."

They may need it. A recent study by Gregory FCA Communications and GoMarcellusShale.com reports that the media coverage of Marcellus Shale development has grown more negative. Among the report's observations: Words like "fracking" have more negative connotations than more industry-preferred alternatives like "horizontal drilling."

"The language is important," agrees Audrey Guskey, a marketing professor at Duquesne University. "Some of the terms you don't understand -- like fracking -- sound very scary."

But some activists say no amount of PR will make them believe in an industry they contend ruins the environment. "We have no reason to trust them in any shape or form," says Mel Packer, with the Marcellus Protest Group. "Everything from them is just total lies. ... Across the nation, this has been proven to be a dangerous process."

And for activists like Munhall's Ken Weir, who was also thrown out of the summit, the industry's usual public-relations spins, claiming gas-drilling is key to "energy independence," are little more than lip service to avoid larger and more harmful environmental issues.

"A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down?" he asks. "Not if the medicine is poison."

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