

Gas drilling moratorium in doubt

By CASEY SEILER State Editor
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ALBANY -- With three days left to use his veto stamp, Gov. David Paterson expressed reservations about a five-month moratorium on new natural gas drilling using the technique known as hydrofracking.

In an interview with WAMC's Alan Chartock, the governor suggested the moratorium was unlikely to have any effect because the state Department of Environmental Conservation's set of regulations for the technique wouldn't be finalized by its May 15 end date.

"It is our opinion that the DEC -- who I have urged to be scrupulously careful in examining this issue -- cannot come to a conclusion within that same (period)," Paterson said in the interview, which aired Friday. "So what I'm saying is that the issue is very serious, but whether the legislation is signed or not probably won't make a difference, because that decision is six months off anyway."

Hydrofracking uses large amounts of water, mixed with small percentages of chemicals, to "fracture" underground shale formations, releasing natural gas. The technique is seen as key to the development of the Marcellus shale, a massive gas-bearing formation that runs through western New York.

Environmentalists argue that, among other concerns, the technique has polluted drinking water resources in other states. Drillers claim hydrofracking is safe, and contend that despite its short span the moratorium is a potential "job-killer."

In his WAMC interview, Paterson expressed concern that the moratorium would cover both vertical and horizontal drilling. Vertical drilling using the technique is already in use across the state; Paterson said it was "not nearly the intrusive threat to the environment" that horizontal hydrofracking is perceived by many to pose.

The moratorium passed the Assembly last week, months after making its way through the Senate. Paterson has until midnight Monday to sign or veto the bill. If he takes no action by that deadline, the legislation will become law.

Casey Seiler can be reached at 454-5619 or cseiler@timesunion.com.

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