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Landowners to Albany: Let the drilling begin

Rally at state Senate draws 400 from around Southern Tier

By Steve Reilly •sreilly@gannett.com • June 9, 2010, 8:45 pm

ALBANY -- Busloads of Southern Tier landowners, frustrated with delay after delay to drilling in the Marcellus Shale, trekked to the state capitol Wednesday to let lawmakers know they are tired of Albany raining on their parade.

Fittingly, it rained on their rally.

About 400 people, most of them members of the Joint Landowners Coalition of NY that organized the rally, braved the inclement weather to gather on the lawn in front of the state Senate building. There, they urged lawmakers to let the state Departmental of Environmental Conservation finish its review of the environmental impact of drilling before enacting any more legislation.

Numerous speakers -- including state Sen. Thomas Libous, R-Binghamton, and Broome County Executive Barbara Fiala, a Democrat -- warned the landowners of an impending flood of anti-drilling bills introduced recently, just weeks before the legislature's summer recess.

One of those, proposed by Long Island Assemblyman Steve Englebright, would postpone drilling until three months after an unfunded EPA study of hydraulic fracturing is completed. That isn't expected to be completed for another three years.

Cris Pasto of Tioga County said the threat of further delays, piled on top of DEC's lengthy review of the environmental effect of hydraulic fracturing, is starting to take its toll on landowners. Commissioner Pete Grannis has said the DEC expects to release its Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement by the end of the year.

"We've been waiting and we've been patient. And now I think we are starting to get a little bit irritated," Pasto said. "How much waiting is necessary?"

The theme of the rally -- "Save Our State" -- reflected the landowners' belief that potential income in royalties and bonus payments will not only benefit landowners, but the entire upstate region.

"There are billions and billions of dollars of natural gas available to the state of New York," said Al Larson of Sullivan County. "It would be an economic boon to a dying state."

Linda Ward of Barker said "there's no sense in cutting health care and education for people when we have this (Marcellus Shale) here."

"The property taxes are just atrocious," said James Ross, also of Barker. "This is growth that will give some relief to the hard-working people of New York state."

Other landowners said their concerns aren't that different from those of environmentalists.

"If you're one acre or 1,000 acres," Conklin's Dell Boyle said, "we want to protect the community."

"Look at what's happening in Pennsylvania. It's 1 percent bad and 99 percent good," Victor Furman of Chenango Forks argued.

After the rally, those riding the bus back to Conklin had varying reactions.

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Marchie Diffendorf, a Joint Landowners Coalition leader and Broome County legislator, said the rally is part of the process of countering lobbying begun by obstructionist environmentalists years before landowners were able to organize their efforts.

"It was very helpful," Diffendorf said of the rally, adding that he is still worried the SGEIS will hit roadblocks from lawmakers. "Until the permits are issued, I'll be concerned."

Another bus rider, Binghamton resident Frank Robente, was also skeptical. State legislators, he said, have already failed the landowners.

"Everybody fighting for us is losing," he said. "Three years later (after the moratorium began), we're on a bus to Albany, taking a day off work to beg them to let us drill for gas."

Dan Fitzsimmons, president of the Joint Landowners Coalition, said the rally and the subsequent meetings with state legislators went "very well," but added he is frustrated by the overwhelming amount of anti-drilling legislation coming from outside the Marcellus Shale territory.

"They're more concerned about their constituents -- we can understand that -- and they're pretty much in charge of what's going on," he said. "It's the old issue of upstate/downstate."

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About 400 people gathered Wednesday at the state Capitol in Albany to encourage legislators to end natural gas drilling delays in the Marcellus Shale. (STEVE REILLY / Staff photo)

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