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Obama Admin Wants Study but Backs Northeast Shale Drilling

By MIKE SORAGHAN of

The Obama administration supports a full study of the effects of gas drilling in the watershed that provides drinking water for Philadelphia and New York City, but it doesn't want to wait until it's finished for drilling to begin.

Gen. Peter "Duke" DeLuca of the Army Corps of Engineers outlined the position in a [letter](#) (pdf) written to Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.) and released today.

The letter offers the first indication of the administration's position on gas drilling in the Northeast since the day after the Nov. 2 midterm election when President Obama highlighted gas drilling as a potential area of common ground with Republicans (*Greenwire*, Nov. 4).

DeLuca, the Army Corps' North Atlantic division engineer, is the federal representative on the Delaware River Basin Commission, which is developing regulations for gas drilling in eastern Pennsylvania and upstate New York.

Hinchey and local environmentalists want the commission to keep its drilling moratorium until its staff does a "cumulative impacts" study, a process that could take years. Drilling supporters want the commission to move ahead as quickly as possible and dislike that the commission has blocked drilling in Pennsylvania while drilling continues rapidly in the rest of the state.

DeLuca's letter, dated Nov. 24, received by Hinchey yesterday and released today, says that he has consulted extensively with other agencies and developed an administration position on drilling in the 13,539-square-mile watershed.

"The administration's position is to continue fully supporting the need for a cumulative impact study," DeLuca wrote. "Simultaneously, all these agencies support the DRBC's decision to develop and release draft natural gas regulations."

DeLuca said there was a "DRBC Federal Agency Summit" in October, at which he led a discussion about the importance of an impact study and asked agencies to suggest sources of money to conduct it.

The commission last week issued its proposed regulations, which would allow drilling to resume once they are finalized. The commission is planning to hold several hearings during a 90-day comment period (*Greenwire*, Dec. 9).

The commission, controlled by the governors of Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and New Jersey along with DeLuca, backed off from earlier, stricter proposals on Marcellus Shale drilling but still proposed measures more restrictive than existing rules in the rest of Pennsylvania.

The long-delayed regulations have emerged as public awareness of "hydraulic fracturing" has increased. Enhancements in the fracturing process -- injecting millions of gallons of chemical-laced water deep underground at high pressure -- are what has opened up the formation in Pennsylvania, New York and surrounding states to development.

The gas drilling industry says fracturing is an established, safe technology that has long been well-regulated by the states. Supporters say the gas in the Marcellus Shale formation under Pennsylvania, New York and adjacent states could power the country for years and allow a switch from coal to a cleaner-burning fuel.

Many farmers have reaped big windfalls by allowing drilling on and under their land. And many see gas development as a significant job creator in the region (*Greenwire*, Sept. 13).

But drilling has contaminated creeks and ruined the water wells of homes near well sites. New York City and Philadelphia have rallied against drilling out of concern it could contaminate their water supply. Many are also concerned that the immense water needs of the industry could lower river levels and restrict water supplies.

[Click here](#) (pdf) to read the letter.

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