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# Obama's Enthusiasm for Gas Drilling Raises Eyebrows

By MIKE SORAGHAN of

President Obama's newfound interest in expanded natural gas drilling yesterday surprised many on all sides of the drilling debate, from environmentalists to drillers and even the coal industry.

Representatives of drilling groups said they had no idea that Obama would make natural gas his lead olive branch to the newly empowered Capitol Hill Republicans. But they were pleased that he did.

"I was surprised by the venue," said Chris Tucker, spokesman for Energy In Depth, a drilling industry group formed to fight off federal regulation of shale gas drilling.

Obama's remarks seemed to refer to vast new sources of shale gas in Pennsylvania, Texas and their neighboring states. Improvements in "hydraulic fracturing" technology have allowed production from formations under those states previously thought to be too expensive to exploit (*E&ENews PM*, Nov. 3).

"We've got, I think, broad agreement that we've got terrific natural gas resources in this country," Obama said when he was pressed for issues on which he could compromise with Republican leaders. "Are we doing everything we can to develop those?"

Tucker said Obama's remarks were in line with the actions of some of his Cabinet departments.

"The president's remarks yesterday fit perfectly with a State Department that is actively looking to export the shale revolution globally, an Energy Department that views shale as a fuel with enormous potential for our future and an EPA that has consistently stated that the technology needed to produce shale gas is safe," Tucker said.

Another gas group, America's Natural Gas Alliance, called Obama's remarks "And they were his strongest public comments to date in support of natural gas."

But not everyone sees gas drilling as so "terrific." Environmentalists are worried that the

"hydraulic fracturing" technology used to pry loose the gas could contaminate drinking water.

And the coal industry, which has been feuding with gas producers about replacing coal generation with gas-fired electric plants, did not appreciate Obama's apparent focus on gas. While he specifically mentioned gas production twice, along with energy efficiency and electric vehicles, he did not mention coal.

"Obviously, we were very disappointed the president didn't mention clean coal technology," said Carol Raulston of the National Mining Association. "If it was a purposeful omission, we don't believe it will be a successful olive branch."

Raulston said Tuesday's election results, a flurry of Republican wins that followed targeted attacks on supporters of cap and trade, indicate that Congress still backs coal. And coal-state lawmakers, such as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), still have a lot of say.

In remarks yesterday before Obama spoke, McConnell cited "clean coal" technology and nuclear power as possible areas of agreement with the White House.

Environmentalists are careful to say they do not flat-out oppose drilling for natural gas, which burns twice as cleanly as coal. Some see it as a "bridge fuel" to replace coal and oil while the nation transitions to renewable sources of energy. But they are leery of the environmental damage caused by drilling, and they want to see substantially more regulation to protect drinking water supplies.

"If we're going to have more natural gas development, it has to be done very carefully," said Dave Alberswerth of the Wilderness Society. "We have to have full public disclosure of the chemicals used, and we have to protect our groundwater from those chemicals by regulating them under the Safe Drinking Water Act."

Drilling companies are vehemently opposed to allowing EPA to regulate fracturing under the Safe Drinking Water Act. They say fracturing is perfectly safe and is already well monitored by state oil and gas regulators.

## **A mystery**

It remains a mystery to key players how the Obama administration's general interest in shale gas drilling rose to become a talking point at a presidential news conference at a crucial juncture in Obama's presidency.

Some note that White House energy and environment "czar" Carol Browner prominently rejected the idea of federal oversight of fracturing when she was President Clinton's EPA

administrator. And one of her aides from EPA days now works at America's Natural Gas Alliance, a group that advocates for increased use of natural gas.

Others point out that the natural gas industry had a friend in Rahm Emanuel, who recently departed as White House chief of staff to run for mayor of Chicago.

When he was in Congress, Emanuel sponsored industry-backed legislation requiring automakers to build 10 percent of their fleet with natural gas fueled vehicles by 2018. The bill also included tax credits and other incentives and mandates to spread natural gas pumps to filling stations across the country.

In addition, the Obama administration refused a request by Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.) to help slow down drilling in upstate New York and eastern Pennsylvania (*Greenwire*, Sept. 22).

Hinchey, Rep. Diana DeGette (D-Colo.) and Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) have introduced legislation called the "FRAC Act" that calls for federal regulation of fracturing and increased public disclosure of the chemicals used.

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