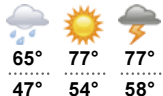




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Pa. gas drilling hearing draws backers, opponents

By KEVIN BEGOS
Monday, 6:31 PM

(AP)

Nearly 400 supporters and opponents of natural gas drilling debated its safety and economic feasibility at a U.S. Department of Energy hearing in western Pennsylvania.

The hearing Monday night by the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board, part of an effort to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil, was aimed at gathering comments about hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a technique that has allowed energy companies to reach previous inaccessible stores of natural gas. It was held at Washington & Jefferson College.

Even before the hearing began, drilling opponents unfurled a large banner that read "Fracking Drilling Spilling Killing" and chanted "No Fracking No Way" and "Save Our Forests _ Ban Fracking Now."

But drilling supporters turned out, too. Geologist Robert Burger of Pittsburgh, who works in a gas-related job, said he was confident that hydrofracking is safe. He said he felt that the current debate was not based on science, but emotions.

During the hearing several people spoke of how drilling had helped the local economy. One man drew applause from the audience when he said that hundreds of wells had been drilled around his nearby family farm with no problems.

Officials with the US Department of Energy said only 90 people would be allowed to testify, but others could e-mail their comments to the advisory board's website.

Larry Watkins said he's worked in the petroleum industry for 29 years. Watkins said he was "personally responsible for drilling thousands of wells" but had never had a complaint from a leaseholder about contaminated well water.

David Meieran, a Pittsburgh resident and member of the group Marcellus Shale Protest, said he doubted that the industry could ever provide enough proof that fracking doesn't threaten drinking water.

On Monday the national group Food & Water Watch called for local and federal bans on fracking.

"Municipalities across the country, including Pittsburgh, are moving to ban fracking or call for statewide and national bans, because they realize that this type of drilling can have dire consequences for drinking water, human health and the environment" said Karina Wilkinson, regional organizer for Food & Water Watch, based in Washington, D.C.

At the hearing filmmaker Josh Fox of Brooklyn, N.Y., criticized the advisory board. "Six out of seven members of this panel have a financial conflict of interest," Fox said, referring to ties that members have to the gas industry. Some audience members rose to cheer his comments, while other booed. Fox's film is "Gasland."

John Deutch is the chairman of the advisory board. According to the Environmental Working Group, a non-profit group, Deutch has received more than \$1.4 million in fees from natural gas companies since 2006. Deutch is a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

New York resident Susan Dorsey attended the hearing with help for travel costs from an industry group.

Dorsey said she was motivated to speak out in favor of drilling after New York put a moratorium on drilling.

"We desperately need jobs in all of our upstate counties," Dorsey said. "This has totally consumed me because of the injustice, the fact that we own the resource but aren't

allowed to develop it."

Political parties have entered the fray, too. On Saturday, the Washington County Republican Party asked local landowners to show up and speak at the meeting.

"The opposition groups are already mobilizing people from outside of the region and state to flood this event. We need employees, service companies, landowners, subcontractors and everyone else," the GOP e-mail read.

The Democratic Party of Pennsylvania responded on Monday with an e-mail that accused Republican officials of "coordinating with the gas industry to 'Astroturf'" the meeting.

The Marcellus Shale formation, a rock deposit that contains what is believed to be the nation's largest-known reservoir of natural gas, lies primarily beneath Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia and Ohio. Pennsylvania is a center of activity, with more than 3,000 wells drilled in the past three years and thousands more planned in the coming years as thick shale emerges as an affordable, plentiful and profitable source of natural gas.

When drilling companies began flocking to Pennsylvania several years ago to exploit the Marcellus Shale formation, they were largely working under laws from the 1980s that never envisioned the combination of horizontal drilling and fracking, a process in which millions of gallons of water, along with sand and toxic chemicals, is blasted deep underground to break up shale rock and release the gas trapped inside it.

So far, the Legislature has done little to change that, other than pass a bill to require faster public disclosure of well-by-well gas production data from Marcellus Shale wells and debate the merits of a tax on gas extraction. Pennsylvania remains the largest gas-drilling state without such a tax.

For decades, energy companies have drilled shallow oil and gas wells in Pennsylvania. But high-volume fracking involves the use of chemicals and produces millions of gallons of often-toxic wastewater, sparking fresh environmental concerns about the protection of public waterways and wells that provide drinking water to millions of people.

A Department of Energy official said the advisory board is scheduled to issue initial recommendations to improve the safety and environmental impact of gas fracking by Aug. 18, and a final report by Nov. 18.

On the Internet:

<http://www.shalegas.energy.gov/>

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