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MARCELLUS SHALE DRILLING

Penn State conference looks at future of Marcellus Shale drilling

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UNIVERSITY PARK — While many natural gas operators have been stepping up to meet high environmental and safety standards, Pennsylvania has seen the deaths of workers, gas leaks and gas migration, said Scott Perry, director of the state’s Bureau of Oil and Gas Management.



CDT/Christopher Weddle

John Felmy, chief economist for the American Petroleum Institute, gives the keynote address during the 2010 Marcellus Summit at the Penn Stater Conference Center Hotel on Monday, October 11, 2010. CDT/Christopher Weddle

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“While I know that the goal is there, we still have some ways to go to realize it,” he said.

Perry’s comments Monday were directed at a room full of people gathered for the 2010 Marcellus Summit at The Penn Stater Conference Center Hotel. He was one of three environmental regulators who spoke on a panel at noon. The other two panelists — from

New York and Ohio — offered perspectives on how their states are managing oversight of the industry.

“All told, I think Pennsylvania is sitting on the largest gas reserve in the entire world,” Perry said.

The Interstate Oil and Gas Commission, Penn State Cooperative Extension and Penn State Outreach are sponsors of the conference, which continues today.

About 425 people are attending, including industry representatives, those with community and environmental concerns, planners and elected officials, and attorneys. Topics include well production, legislation, legal issues, environmental regulations and industry perspective.

Perry outlined the steps the state Department of Environmental Protection is taking to tighten environmental oversight of natural gas drilling. In particular, he said, new regulations Pennsylvania’s Environmental Quality Board is considering at a meeting today will address gas migration — gas moving underground, sometimes into well water — and prevention of well blowouts.

If the changes being considered today are approved, any operator that gets a complaint about gas migration will have to investigate reports immediately. Other changes would govern the installation and use of blowout prevention equipment, set standards concerning casing and cementing in wellbores, and establish new inspections requirements and emergency procedures.

The state recently adopted changes that mean that companies that want to get wastewater discharge permits will have to treat the water to drinking water standards. Perry said the rule change is fairly controversial, but one the DEP is proud of.

The Marcellus Shale region stretches from New York to Virginia, crossing through northern and western Centre County. Developers are using a process known as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, that pushes water mixed with sand and chemicals into the shale to tap into the gas reserves.

Brad Field, director of the division of mineral resources in New York’s Department of Environmental Conservation, explained that state’s moratorium on drilling that requires high volumes of water while the regulations are reviewed and updated.

“Like Pennsylvania, New York has a long history of oil and gas development,” Field said.

While horizontal drilling is not a new technology, Field said, what is different with Marcellus is the high volume of water being used for fracking and the depth and the duration of the drilling. Concerns include surface spills and wastewater disposal.

Migration of fluids to underground drinking water has been a big concern, he said. New York State commissioned a study specifically of this issue, he said, which found that deeper than 2,000 feet below the surface, the likelihood of any impact from fracking is nil.

John Felmy, chief economist at the American Petroleum Institute, spoke in the morning about how the Marcellus Shale can be developed responsibly and what it could mean in terms of providing jobs and boosting the economy.

“We can do this, and we can do this right,” he said.

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