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## Philadelphia utility to avoid Marcellus natgas

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\* Commission concerned about effects of "fracking"

\* Marcellus buys banned pending EPA review due in 2012

By Jon Hurdle

PHILADELPHIA, Jan 18 (Reuters) - Philadelphia officials on Tuesday directed a city utility not to buy natural gas from the Marcellus Shale until more is known about the safety of the hydraulic fracturing technique used to extract it.

With its largely symbolic gesture, Philadelphia becomes the first major U.S. city to refuse to buy natural gas obtained by the controversial method of hydraulic fracturing, said Philadelphia Councilman Curtis Jones, who sponsored the measure.

The city's Gas Commission, a regulatory body that oversees Philadelphia Gas Works, approved a City Council report that preemptively requires the city to avoid any purchases of gas from the Marcellus, a major gas field underlying about two-thirds of Pennsylvania and parts of surrounding states.

The process known as "fracking" involves blasting a mixture of chemicals, sand and water deep underground to fracture shale formations, allowing natural gas to escape. For an index of shale gas companies, double-click on TRSHALEGAS.

Philadelphia officials are concerned that toxic chemicals used in fracking may contaminate the Delaware River watershed that supplies city water.

"There is a very significant issue for Philadelphia because it directly affects the watershed from which the city draws its drinking water," said Philip Bertocci, a public advocate who represents residential customers of Philadelphia Gas Works.

The city council resolution says any purchases of Marcellus gas should be avoided until the Environmental Protection Agency completes a national study into the safety of fracking, expected in 2012. The commission's resolution, which Jones said was final, was due to return to the city council on Thursday for a non-binding vote.

Philadelphia Gas Works buys \$300 million to \$350 million of gas per year but none of it from the Marcellus Shale and it has no plans to do so, a spokesman said. Most of its gas comes via pipeline from the Gulf of Mexico.

The Gas Commission's unanimous vote followed a decision by the Pittsburgh City Council to preemptively ban hydraulic fracturing in that city.

Concern over the safety of "fracking" prompted New York state to impose a moratorium on the technique. In Buffalo, New York, the city council was expected to vote later this month on a ban similar to Pittsburgh's.

The Marcellus Shale Coalition, an industry group, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. (Reporting by Jon Hurdle; Editing by Daniel Trotta and David Gregorio)

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