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## Polarized hearing brings drilling debate to the Delaware River Basin

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Published: February 23, 2011

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Chaz Augello of Lebanon Township, Wayne County, a farmer who owns 400 acres and raises beef cattle and crops, also is Lebanon Township supervisor, speaks briefly during Tuesday afternoon's hearing on natural gas drilling in which he is for. "I love my farm" he said. Butch Comegys / Staff Photographer



Pro environmentalist Jackie DeSau of Beach Lake, reacts during a speaker's comments regarding gas drilling regulations held on Tuesday afternoon at Honesdale High School. DeSau is against gas drilling. Butch Comegys / Staff Photographer

[Image Gallery for Polarized hearing brings drilling debate to the Delaware River Basin](#)

HONESDALE - Natural gas drilling in the Delaware River Basin will either save or devastate a region whose fate is in the hands of the interstate commission that regulates water quality there, according to the polarized testimony given by representatives of both sides of the drilling debate during hearings at Honesdale High School on Tuesday.

About 90 people spoke at an afternoon session attended by more than 300 people. It was one of four hearings held by the Delaware River Basin Commission in Honesdale and Liberty, N.Y. on Tuesday about proposed natural gas drilling regulations that would apply to the 13,539-square-mile watershed where drilling has largely been on hold while the commission develops its rules.

The basin contains most of Wayne, Pike and Monroe counties as well as slivers of Lackawanna and Luzerne.

If adopted, the regulations will complement rules in place or being developed by state environmental agencies - a necessary overlap because "the Delaware River Basin is a special place," commission Executive Director Carol R. Collier said before the hearing: it provides drinking water to more than 15 million people and contains waterways whose exceptional value demands extra protection.

But the "redundancy" of regulations was one of the primary criticisms raised by speakers at the afternoon session, when comments were predominantly made by those who welcome the drilling.

Drilling supporters repeated concerns that the commission's proposed regulations are so stringent that they will prevent drilling in Wayne County, they fail to balance economic concerns with environmental ones, and they take away private property owners' rights.

"You have the audacity to claim that your proposed regulations prevail over our commonwealth, disregarding our own laws," Wayne County landowner Carol Woodmansee yelled into the microphone in the high school's auditorium. "Your true agenda is to never cut a tree, put Wayne County out of business and condemn us to an existence of bucolic poverty."

The sole gas drilling industry representative - David Callahan of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, which represents most of the major operators in the state - gave an outline of the industry's opposition to the proposed rules, especially a centerpiece of the regulations that would require drillers with more than five well pads to detail in advance their foreseeable activity in a defined geographic area, including each well pad, access road, pipeline and compressor station.

"The requirement of a 'Natural Gas Development Plan' is unworkable, mandating our industry to detail infrastructure plans years prior to any development," Mr. Callahan said. "Few industries can provide such plans that far in advance."

The gas drilling coalition also questioned the power the draft regulations give to the DRBC executive director to set standards on a case-by-case basis and whether the commission even has the legal authority to set standards for the siting, design and operation of gas well pads.

Drilling opponents, many wearing "Don't Drill the Delaware" stickers, expressed frustration that the commission developed the draft regulations before any studies of the cumulative impact of natural gas operations on the watershed have begun.

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They also argued the proposed rules rely too much on the industry to police itself and ignore what they say are inherent risks in the drilling process that will inevitably lead to accidents and contamination.

"These rules will not prevent individual catastrophic pollution events, and they also will not prevent the cumulative environmental degradation that you are supposed to prevent," Tracy Carluccio, deputy director of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network, said as a handful of audience members raised small signs that read "Do No Harm."

"The DRBC is our only defense against gasland, and we will not let you sacrifice our water for gas," she said.

The audience at the afternoon session largely honored rules that barred protests and heckling, save for a few jibes at "Gasland" filmmaker Josh Fox, who testified against the drilling, and a comment that the commission is like "a manure salesman with a mouthful of samples." Drilling supporters wore neon stickers that read, "I support NG in the DRB," and someone snuck one onto the back of outspoken drilling opponent James Barth's jacket.

Speakers lined up in the cold two hours before the doors opened at 12:30 p.m. to ensure a spot at the podium, which was first come, first served.

One request made by drilling opponents, for more time for public comment and more public hearings, will be addressed during a meeting of the river basin's commissioners on March 2, Ms. Collier said.

About 1,600 written comments had been submitted to the agency before the start of Tuesday's hearings. The draft regulations and a link to provide written comments online are at www.drbc.net.

Contact the writer: llegere@timeshamrock.com

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"Drilling supporters repeated concerns that the commission's proposed regulations are so stringent that they will prevent drilling in Wayne County, they fail to balance economic concerns with environmental ones, and they take away private property owners' rights."

If economic concerns are ever given equal footing to the environmental concerns for the water table that we ALL rely on, then we are welcoming cancers and other illnesses on our children for the economic benefit of those who can take those economic benefits and move to somewhere that is safe of the pollutants their greed has foisted on the rest of us.

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