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Ridge defends shale drilling at CMU

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By Sean D. Hamill, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

At the beginning of his speech at Carnegie Mellon University Thursday, former Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge said he knew when he was invited to the environmentally themed lecture series, it was "designed to be provocative."

That's because since July he and his consulting firm have represented the Marcellus Shale Coalition. The coalition represents natural gas drillers, and Mr. Ridge occasionally becomes the public face of the burgeoning industry.

That puts him at odds with many environmental groups that question the industry's safety record and people who say they have had their drinking water tainted, or local roads damaged, or streams contaminated by drilling rig sites and trucks. Some of them showed up for Mr. Ridge's speech Thursday.

In his speech to a full house of 250 people in Porter Hall, he emphasized the industry's commitment to the environment.

He noted that when he speaks to residents about the Marcellus Shale, the No. 1 question he gets is about the impact on water quality.

"As Pennsylvanians, we cherish what we have," he said, noting the wealth of forestland but also the problems the state has had over the years with coal mines ruining streams. "But we've also seen what can happen when the stewardship of the environment comes second."

Then, during a half-hour question-and-answer session with the audience, he got some of those provocative questions he was anticipating.

"Should the industry be in bedroom communities 200 yards from homes?" asked Jet Miskis, a resident and activist from Peters, where she said there could be 30 separate drill sites in a few years. She challenged Mr. Ridge to visit with people who had had their water tainted by the fracking process involved in drilling gas wells.

"I love your passion," Mr. Ridge told Ms. Miskis. "I've heard people say their water was contaminated. But I don't believe it's caused by fracking."

A collective groan came up from maybe a dozen people across the room who didn't agree with Mr. Ridge.

He told them in reply: "Science has to drive the conversation."

No one has ever proven contamination, he said, from any of the 1 million wells drilled using the fracking process, which involves injecting thousands to millions of gallons of mostly water and sand, but also some chemicals, into the shale rock to fracture it and free up the natural gas.

Moreover, he said, "It's the landowners who agreed to drill."

When Jane Clougherty, an assistant professor of environmental and occupational health at the University of Pittsburgh, asked Mr. Ridge about Pennsylvania's well-monitoring program, she didn't think he knew the answer; and she said as a spokesman for the industry, "You should know the answer."

To that Mr. Ridge told her: "I didn't graduate with an engineering degree."

"I'd be more concerned if the state officials doing the monitoring didn't have the expertise," he said.

Sean D. Hamill: shamill@post-gazette.com or 412-263-2579.

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