

Shale Process Backed

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Goodlatte Wants Feds' Hands Off 'Hydrofracking'

By [Jeremy Hunt](#)

HARRISONBURG - Siding with the natural gas industry, U.S. Rep. Bob Goodlatte says no scientific evidence conclusively shows that a controversial drilling technique is harmful to the environment.

The Roanoke Republican is a member of the House Natural Gas Caucus, which sent a letter earlier this month to the Interior Department that says hydraulic fracturing is "properly managed and regulated at the state level."

But Rockingham County Supervisor Pablo Cuevas has said Virginia's regulations have shortcomings, which is why he has been unwilling to take action on a drilling proposal in Bergton.

Cuevas has repeatedly said there is a lack of coordination among state agencies regarding the drilling permitting process.

Houston-based Carrizo Oil and Gas requested a special-use permit from the Board of Supervisors to drill in the Marcellus Shale field. The field, which spans several states, including western Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio and New York, contains a vast reserve of natural gas.

Supervisors tabled the request last February to gain more information about the proposal.

Companies have been buying up mineral rights and leasing land, particularly in Pennsylvania, in recent years with hopes of cashing in on the fuel. To extract the gas, they pump millions of gallons of water, sand and chemicals into the sedimentary formation to break it up and release the gas.

Industry officials insist the method is safe, but critics say it poses health and environmental hazards.

What's not disputed is the potential economic windfall it presents to landowners, governments and the companies.

A West Virginia University study - conducted for an industry association in that state and released this week - found activity related to drilling the Marcellus created 7,600 jobs and \$298 million in wages in and benefits in 2009.

The Natural Gas Caucus letter urges Interior Secretary Ken Salazar not to impose new regulations on hydraulic fracturing - also called hydrofracking - on federal land until a study by the Environmental Protection Agency is complete. Last year, the EPA began a two-year study to analyze the technique's impact on water.

Congress requested the review in 2009 after critics said another EPA study done in 2004 was incomplete and too narrow.

The caucus letter was criticized by local activists who banded together when Carrizo applied for its permit in Rockingham County.

"They want to be cautious about the regulations, but they never said they want to be cautious about our Earth or our water or our environment," said Bruce Ritchie, co-founder of the Land, Air, Water Stewardship-Action Group.

"To me, that's a little alarming. I guess it says they are focused more on the economy than our environment," he said.

Hydrofracking opponents say the drilling method pollutes wells and air and sucks streams dry because it requires so much water.

The caucus letter, however, states the "vast majority of scientific evidence shows hydraulic fracturing to be safe [and] less resource-intensive for the environment than traditional methods."

Goodlatte says potential environmental problems are why Congress asked for the EPA study.

"We'd been interested to find any instances anywhere in the country of hydrofracking causing pollution in drinking water," he said. "Obviously, if it does, that should be a major concern."

Marcellus Shale drilling has raised eyebrows in various state and local governments. This week, West Virginia

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lawmakers began trying to figure out how to properly regulate the industry, even as drilling has been going on for the last few years.

Officials with the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy contend state laws are adequate to regulate hydrofracking.

"As far as whether the Virginia regulations are sufficient, in this area I'd have to leave that to our state legislators," Goodlatte said.

- The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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