

Most speak out against shale gas production at Pennsylvania forum

Jim Magill, Platts, 7-23-10

PITTSBURGH, Pa. -- Highlighting concerns over its possible effects on groundwater, most of the 150 speakers at a US Environmental Protection Agency forum in southwestern Pennsylvania spoke out against shale gas production in the state.

The meeting Thursday night in the small town of Canonsburg, which drew 1,200 people, was the third in a series of four to be held by the EPA in shale gas-producing basins across the US to gather public input ahead of a two-year study it plans to examine the impacts of hydraulic fracturing could have on groundwater.

The Pennsylvania meeting site sits in a region that in recent years has seen a boom of gas drilling targeting the Marcellus Shale.

While a handful of speakers -- most identifying themselves as being currently or formerly employed in the gas industry or representing pro-industry organizations -- defended the use of fracking as a safe and efficient technology for unlocking the gas trapped in shale, the vast majority -- mostly area residents, scientists and conservationists -- demanded greater regulation or, in some cases, an outright ban on the practice.

Many of the latter group called on the EPA to expand the study beyond just looking at the impacts of fracking and to study what happens to the water and chemicals used in fracking before, during and after the work is done. Others wanted the study to be expanded still further, to include impacts of gas drilling on air quality, vehicle traffic and quality-of-life issues such as crime.

One member of the Vietnam Veterans of America compared the situation surrounding fracking fluid to that of Agent Orange, used by the US military during the Vietnam War as a defoliant, and in which health studies revealed toxic effects 20 years after the war's end. "Is Pennsylvania worth fighting for?" he asked. "The battle lines are drawn."

JOBS TO TEXANS

Although a definite link has never been established between fracking and contamination of groundwater, dozens of speakers claimed to be victims of such a link. One woman who said her family buys drinking water because her well became contaminated with styrene, which she blamed on nearby gas drilling.

Another speaker, representing a local environmental group, Clearville Citizens for Sustainability, said it tested groundwater quality prior to the onset of gas drilling and found the water to be of good quality. "After drilling we have pollution," she said.

A member of the Steel Valley Trail Council, said when the gas industry came into the Marcellus Shale, drillers touted the benefits of clean-burning natural gas and "identified oodles of jobs" for local residents. "The jobs have gone to Texans," he said.

Many of the speakers said they thought that a moratorium should be imposed on new in the Marcellus drilling in Pennsylvania, similar to the one called by the state of New York as it develops new drilling guidelines.

Supporters of fracking pointed to the 60-year history of the practice on hundreds of thousands of wells over that

time period. Previous studies by state regulatory agencies and the EPA itself had always found the practice to be safe, they said.

Several pro-industry speakers dismissed the complaints of the anti-fracking speakers as alarmist and called for the EPA study to "focus on science, not emotion."

A speaker who identified himself as a Halliburton employee said the agency should limit the scope of the study to what Congress asked it to focus on and to "avoid wasting time" in expanding the scope beyond that congressional mandate.

"The EPA will find that fracking poses no significant threats to health," he said.

'NO NEGATIVE EFFECTS'

Lou D'Amico, president of the Pennsylvania Independent Oil and Gas Association, said fracking was "neither new nor controversial." He cited a study the EPA undertook during the Clinton administration on the impacts of fracking in coalbed methane wells, which found "no negative effects of fracking from coalbed methane drilling."

D'Amico added that most CBM wells are drilled to much shallower depths than Marcellus Shale wells, placing them that much closer to groundwater aquifers. The EPA should avail itself of the "huge database" of information available through industry players and state regulatory agencies in pursuing its study, he said.

EPA plans to continue the scoping process through the end of the year and begin the study itself in early 2011, the EPA officials said. Preliminary results of the study should be available by the end of 2012, they said.