

# EPA -- fracking study is a challenge

Shelley DuBois, CNN, 9-16-10

FORTUNE -- In Binghamton, New York on Wednesday, hundreds of locals filled the Broome County Theater to speak their minds, two minutes a time, to four members of the Environmental Protection Agency. They voiced opinions about a controversial process called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, to tap into huge reserves of shale gas thousands of feet below ground. New York sits on one of the largest known reserves of natural gas, which many people, including President Obama, have called a new, crucial resource for the country.

But residents in places where fracking occurs have raised concerns that the process isn't regulated enough -- that it leaches dangerous chemicals into groundwater and contaminates it with methane gas. Proponents believe that natural gas development can be a huge boon for the area, and drilling needs to happen as soon as possible.

Fracking, which is state regulated, isn't legal in New York yet, and there was enough of an uproar about these issues that locals called for the EPA to step in and study the process.

People on all sides are clamoring for the study, which is expected to be completed by 2012. The pro-fracking camp believes that good science will exonerate the practice. Anti-frackers want to know the process is safe before companies start drilling for shale. The EPA is under pressure.

After the hearing, *Fortune* spoke with Fred Hauchman, the Director of Science Policy about the task ahead of him. He offered insight about how to get good scientific results in a short timeframe, the EPA's communication challenge and the benefit of getting face time with the people.

**Why did the EPA agree to study this?** Natural gas is important to the country, but at the same time a lot of concerns have been expressed. And the public deserves to have answers to their questions.

**How do you design a study that's going to yield answers in just two years?** Unquestionably it will take resources and it will take a lot of focus and energy. I don't think any of us have any illusions that we'll have all the answers in two years. But we're convinced that we can do research over this period of time that will be very informative.

**What's going to be the main focus?** We were directed by Congress to focus our efforts on drinking water. But people have said, several times, take a comprehensive look at hydraulic fracturing -- you can't just look at one part of it. We see a challenge there -- obviously, we can only do so much with the resources we have and the time we have. But we need to consider those comments.

**How long will it take?** We have this two-year timeframe, during which we expect to get good results, which we would characterize as preliminary. We know that there are going to continue to be questions. Any researcher will tell you we have to keep studying this. This is a big task we've taken on, and we anticipate that research will have to go on beyond that two-year period.

**How many people in the EPA will work on this?** We've not fully resourced it. Right now we just know it's going to take a sizeable effort.

It's been identified as one of the top priorities for our Office of Research and Development. That came right out of the system administrator's mouth.

**Do you have an idea of the plan of attack?** We're going to propose to the Science Advisory Board that some part of the study look at operations before they begin, in addition to testing sites during development and after drilling has started. We're also looking retrospectively because the states have information through their regulatory activities. We're looking at existing data that we have in hand that can help us, but we're also looking at doing studies alongside fracturing operations.

**People on both sides are so passionate about this. Is drilling for natural gas getting more scrutiny than methods of producing other kinds of fuels?** Everybody's looking at this study. I think it's fair to say that this administration has come in and told us from the get go that transparency is the hallmark of everything we do. I think this is a great example of that. It's to our benefit. Venues like this with input from the public are very, very helpful.

**Do you consider it the EPA's responsibility to keep educating people once the results come out?** Sure, we're going to need to go to great lengths to help with the interpretation of what's likely to be a very complex study in the end. There are a lot of technical issues, and unless you're an expert in that area, it's difficult to get your head around it. We're going to need to go the extra mile to translate and respond to questions.

**You've sat through four four-hour sessions within the past two days. You must be exhausted.** Actually it's good. It's important for us to hear real concerns. What a great opportunity for science to really inform some very important decisions.