

O'Malley's executive order that halts fracking seen as political maneuver

David Hill, Washington Times, 6-12-11

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley's executive order calling for a study on natural-gas drilling has upset some political opponents, who note that a similar proposal failed in this year's General Assembly.

Mr. O'Malley, a Democrat, issued an order last week calling for a study into the economic and environmental effects of drilling the Marcellus Shale — a 95,000-square-mile Appalachian natural-gas reserve located partially in Western Maryland.

States including Pennsylvania and West Virginia already allow drilling, but Maryland's study places an effective three-year moratorium within the state. A Maryland bill that called for a two-year study passed the House this year, but never reached the Senate floor.

Sen. George C. Edwards, Garrett Republican, criticized the governor's unilateral decision and argued it was done in part to satisfy environmental groups that have long given him support.

"It's a little disheartening that he did this," said Mr. Edwards, whose district sits on the shale. "I think it's somewhat political. Who you get support from is who you side with on those issues."

Drilling supporters have touted the jobs and domestic energy that could be created, while opponents have raised concerns over drilling's potential effect on drinking water.

The practice has proved controversial, as some studies have found high methane levels in drinking water near drilling sites, as well as illness in drill workers.

New York currently has a moratorium on drilling. And last fall, Pittsburgh became the first Pennsylvania city to issue an outright ban.

Maryland officials will conduct a three-part study, set to end in 2014, to explore potential taxing approaches, safety regulations and environmental standards for drilling.

"The study is about making sure that we get it right, because second chances are very expensive," said Delegate Heather R. Mizeur, Montgomery Democrat, who sponsored this year's failed bill calling for a similar study. "The desire to study isn't an anti-drilling approach."

While Ms. Mizeur's bill failed to pass the assembly, she said it had "overwhelmingly strong" support and would have passed if legislators had more time during the 90-day session. The bill passed 98 to 40 in the House before stalling in the Senate.

Ms. Mizeur defended the governor's order, saying that he was exercising the assembly's will and that he often makes equally influential decisions as one of three members on the state Board of Public Works.

"It's not out of the ordinary for a governor to step in," she said. "It's not that we failed in the Senate. It's that we ran out of time."

Mr. Edwards said that, regardless of the excuse, the bill was before the assembly and was not approved — and that Mr. O'Malley overreached in issuing the order.

While many legislators have praised the wait-and-see approach, Allegany and Garrett counties -- the two counties where drilling would take place — seem less hesitant to move forward. Mr. Edwards said the state has been looking into fracking for nearly two years, and that continuing to wait will only delay the arrival of jobs and lower energy costs.

"Here's an opportunity to create lots of jobs — well-paying jobs — and we're going to look at it for another three years," he said, adding that drilling companies "are looking at these other states because Maryland is not drilling."