

Companies send workers to Hill to make case for fracking

Anne C. Mulkern, Environment & Energy Publishing, 3-8-11

Natural gas company workers plan to lobby lawmakers today on the safety of drilling techniques amid controversy over exploration for the fuel.

Eighteen workers from six states will visit House and Senate members in an event organized by industry influence group American Petroleum Institute. It started yesterday and continues today. Workers yesterday talked to the White House's Council on Environmental Quality.

"It's critical for our elected officials to hear from their own constituents about the importance of natural gas to local communities, to jobs, and our energy security," said Marty Durbin, API executive vice president for government affairs. "These employees represent job creation among the thousands of suppliers and service companies that benefit from America's investment in this abundant, clean-burning domestic fuel."

The natural gas workers come from Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Texas and West Virginia. Those are among the states where controversy has erupted over the natural gas drilling technique known as hydraulic fracturing, where fluid is injected into the ground to break up rock formations.

The employees are technical experts with service, supply and drilling companies, Durbin said. They are focused on areas like water quality management, he said.

Environmental groups have raised concerns that the chemicals used in the practice leak into water. Additionally, they argue that methane travels into people's homes, creating the kind of events seen in the Oscar-nominated documentary "Gasland," where people can turn on their water faucets and ignite flames.

The Sierra Club and Environmental Defense Fund both have campaigns to underscore what they see as the risks of the natural gas boom.

"If the natural gas industry is truly committed to the safe production of natural gas, they should be working with Congress to close the regulatory loopholes the industry currently enjoys," said Deb Nardone, senior campaign representative for the Sierra Club. "Congress needs to put an end to the exemptions and exceptions given to the gas industry, privileges that no other industry receive."

Congress, Nardone added, should require natural gas companies to disclose fully the chemicals they use for extraction.

"Given the significant number of violations across the country - for example, Marcellus gas drillers in PA commit an average of 1.5 violations a day - and recent findings of major flaws in safety regulations, we expect congressional leaders to push for better safeguards that protect Americans' health and safety," Nardone added.

Greenpeace has also raised concerns.

"Natural gas drillers can't claim to represent any notion of 'clean energy' when they're dumping toxic pollution into waterways, contaminating drinking water and getting a lobbying boost from the American Petroleum Institute against clean water protections," said Kyle Ash, Greenpeace senior legislative representative.

API said that the industry "stands by its strong record over the past 60-plus years.

"We continue to work with engineers, geologists, and environmental and government experts to develop the best standards and practices," Durbin said. "These standards address activities such as construction practices, the environment, and water use and management procedures to protect our drinking water and our communities."

The lawmaker visits were planned about two months ago and were not motivated by any of the recent adverse publicity, Durbin said. The workers are not pushing for any particular bills, he said.

"It certainly is timely at a time when you have the issue" of hydraulic fracturing in the news, Durbin said. "This is a great opportunity for us to be in front of the policymakers who are going to have to make decisions on this."

Natural gas is surging in use, pushed by record low prices for the fuel.

In 2010, natural gas constituted 24 percent of power generation, from 13 percent in 1996, according to U.S. Energy Information Administration.

EIA projects that by 2024, natural gas will drop back slightly to 21 percent because of growth in renewable power and because the price of natural gas will start to rise, making coal more competitive.