

Poll says majority of Americans back fracking bans by cities

Max B. Baker, Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram, 4-29-15

A majority of Americans and Texans support allowing cities to ban hydraulic fracturing, even if state law otherwise permits it, according to a national online poll released Wednesday by the University of Texas at Austin.

The UT Energy Poll shows that 58 percent of the people surveyed nationally support giving cities the authority to adopt bans such as the one passed by Denton, Texas, in November. In the poll, 25 percent disagreed that cities should be allowed to ban the controversial drilling practice, also known as "fracking."

"At present, it appears a large majority of Americans think cities should have the right to decide if they want to ban fracking locally," said UT Energy Poll Director Sheril Kirshenbaum. The poll surveyed 2,078 people from across the country and has a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

The poll also reported that only 44 percent nationally said they were familiar with fracking, and that based on what they knew that 44 percent were against it while 42 percent voiced their support.

Texans were far more knowledgeable, with 50 percent saying they were familiar with fracking. Fifty percent of Texans said they supported fracking and 41 percent expressed opposition, according to the poll.

The poll, conducted from March 4-13, also found that partisan politics is polarizing Americans' views of a number of controversial energy issues, including the Keystone XL pipeline, a 1,179-mile pipeline to ship crude oil from the Canadian oil sands to Texas.

Nearly two out of three Republicans say they would vote for a candidate who favors completion of the controversial pipeline, compared to 29 percent of Democrats, according to the poll. But the poll also found that overall support for the Keystone has dropped from 46 percent to 39 percent.

"We're seeing a continuing divergence of views on key energy issues that clearly tracks political party lines," Kirshenbaum said.

While widespread fracking has greatly boosted domestic oil and gas production, it has also sparked growing opposition, including moratoriums in New York and several cities in Colorado and California.

The UT Energy Poll also comes at a time when Texas lawmakers are in the midst of working on legislation that would impose more state control over the oil and gas drilling industry and limit a municipalities power to regulate it.

On Thursday, the state Senate Natural Resources and Economic Development Committee is scheduled to conduct a hearing on House Bill 40, what has been called the "Denton fracking bill," that establishes more firmly the state's ultimate control over drilling.

Overwhelmingly passed by the House earlier this month, HB40 gives the state ultimate control over drilling while allowing cities to adopt ordinances regulating surface operations such as traffic, lights and noise. A city can also impose "reasonable" setback requirements under the proposal.

But a municipality would not be allowed to outright ban hydraulic fracturing in the way Denton did in the fall following problems with one particularly energy company.

Earlier, the Texas Oil and Gas Association released a poll touting a finding that 75 percent of Texans agree that the state should be in charge of regulating the oil and gas industry.