

US lawmakers resist call for natural gas drilling rules

Federal oversight of fracking called too burdensome

Tom Doggett, Reuters, 4-27-10

WASHINGTON -- Two U.S. lawmakers on Tuesday urged Congress to resist calls to pass federal regulations limiting a drilling technique that extracts natural gas from rock formations but has been blamed for contaminating drinking water supplies.

State governments, not the federal government, are now responsible for regulating the drilling technique called hydraulic fracturing. Natural gas producers are worried that federal regulation could hinder extraction of gas from shale rock formations, which account for 15 percent to 20 percent of U.S. output of natural gas.

Demand for natural gas has grown as electric utilities build gas-fired power plants that emit much less carbon dioxide than coal generators.

The House Energy and Commerce Committee is investigating hydraulic fracturing, also known as fracking, and some lawmakers are pushing legislation to regulate the practice.

Two committee members, Representatives John Sullivan, a Republican from Oklahoma, and Arkansas Democrat Mike Ross, said the panel would be short-sighted to pass a bill putting fracking under U.S. safe drinking water law before the Environmental Protection Agency completes a study of the drilling technique which is expected to take two years.

Allowing the EPA to oversee fracking "would add burdensome and unnecessary regulatory requirements to the drilling and completion of oil and gas wells which could result in increasing costs of producing domestic natural gas resources," the lawmakers said in a letter to Representative Henry Waxman, the energy committee's chairman.

"We believe that state regulatory agencies are the most appropriate regulatory bodies to provide oversight and protection of hydrologically and environmentally sensitive localities as they relate to hydraulic fracturing," they said.

Fracking injects a mixture of water, sand and chemicals into rock formations to stimulate oil and natural gas production. Some environmental groups claim the technique can contaminate ground water and want the government to regulate it.

However, energy companies say improved fracking technology allows them to drill for oil and gas in an environmentally safe manner. They also say there is no evidence fracking has contaminated water supplies.