

EPA Hears Residents' Pros and Cons of Fracking at Binghamton Forum

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

Broader View Weekly, September 16, 2010

After many venue changes and postponements, residents of upstate New York and the northern tier of Pennsylvania finally had their chance, this week, to tell the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) what they think about the controversial process of hydraulic fracturing.

The EPA held four listening sessions over two days at the Forum Theater in Binghamton – Monday September 13 and Wednesday September 15 – the final meeting in a series of public forums held nationwide. EPA held the public meetings in an attempt to promote discussion about the scope of the upcoming study on hydraulic fracturing and gather public perspectives on risks, data that may inform the study, and gain help identifying some of the gaps in data and information.

About 400 people registered to provide comments over the two days, with 100 slots allotted to speakers each session. But officials, warned that thousands might attend raucous protest rallies, beefed up security. By mid-afternoon only 700 people had shown up at the Forum, a far cry from the 8,000 predicted last month.

Monday morning saw supporters of drilling at one end of the street and environmental advocates gathering at the other. In between the street was empty, blocked off from traffic – a no-man's land presided over by a handful of bored police officers and the occasional journalist looking for a sound byte.

Pass Gas? No Fracking Way!

About 100 pro-drilling advocates, organized by the joint landowner's coalition, gathered behind barricades at the north end of Washington Street. Sporting green caps and holding "Friends of Natural Gas" signs, they chanted "Pass the Gas" and "Safe Drilling Now".

Meanwhile, a block away the pro-environment crowd danced to a different tune. Hand-made signs ranged from thanking EPA for protecting children to a huge banner that claimed "They said it was safe to drill in the Gulf, too." While someone put the finishing touches on a drill-rig, "Frackin' stein" roamed through the crowd, as did a man dressed in Hazmat suit.

If you wanted noise and celebrities, the south end of the street was the place to be. Oren Lyons, a traditional Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation, stressed the importance of clean water for NY and for the world. Holding a map of NY watersheds, Walter Hang rallied people to send the Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement (SGEIS) back to the drawing board.

Tompkins County legislator Martha Robertson reminded people that "this is not just a local issue but a national issue." It's about more than Marcellus, she said; there's Utica shale down there too. The rally also drew people from Pennsylvania. Julie and Craig Sautner, from Dimock, brought up a gallon of tap water.

We used to have clear, good water, Craig told the crowd. At least until Cabot drilled. He held up the jug of brown water full of sediment. “I can’t say that this will happen to you. But is it worth the risk?”

Public Comments Important

Judith Enck, EPA regional administrator for Region 2, explained that the process for the new study on hydraulic fracturing will be “transparent and peer-reviewed”. While it will rely on input from industry and the public, the study will be focused on scientific data. Input from the four public meetings in Binghamton will help shape the scope of the study.

Dr. Robert Puls, technical lead for the study, listed a number of areas where public feedback is particularly important: concerns about the fate of fracking chemicals; best locations to conduct case studies; concerns about groundwater; and any areas where people think information is lacking.

After a brief introduction, the public was invited to submit oral comments to the panel. Speakers were limited to two minutes, and a timer was projected on a screen. Congressman Maurice Hinchey, the first speaker to address the EPA panel, spoke for nearly ten minutes, highlighting the need for holding the gas industry to the same standards as other industries.

“The EPA must do all it can to ensure that its scientists and researchers are not influenced by industry or politics,” Hinchey said. Only then can the public be assured that the EPA study is carried out in the public’s interest. “Public health and the well-being of our environment deserve nothing less,” he added.

Congressman Michael Arcuri stressed the need for proper precautions. “If the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has taught us anything, it is that accidents can happen,” he said. No matter how unlikely they are, Arcuri noted that such accidents have the potential to be devastating.

After expressing concerns about the inadequate staffing of NY Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and their lack of specificity in knowledge, Ross Horowitz, a Danby homeowner, played a 10-second audio recording of complete silence. These are the lost sounds, Horowitz said, of millions of tourists, of children playing, of clean water flowing. “These sounds are missing in an industrial wasteland.”

Pro-drilling advocates, for the most part, tended to hammer on the same talking points: the lack of contamination caused by a narrowly defined process of fracking; the relative safety of the chemicals; and the economic need for the money gas drilling will bring to state and local economies and landowners.

“Can Pennsylvania and NY citizens afford to be shut out of economic opportunities?” queried Ryan Scott.

Although Adam Saslow, the facilitator of the public sessions, implored people in the audience to withhold applause, both sides of the issue applauded and shouted out comments throughout the afternoon. Speakers – including Hinchey – who continued beyond their two-minute allotment were met with shouts of “time!”

Saslow repeatedly reminded people that applause takes time, and the forums were on a tight schedule. As it was, Monday's first session was extended an extra 15 minutes to accommodate the pre-registered speakers. A handful of people who signed up to speak that morning were told they would have to return on Wednesday.

How to Get Involved

If you haven't submitted comments on the EPA's Hydraulic Fracturing Study yet, there is still time. The deadline for comments is September 28, 2010.

You may submit e-mail comments to EPA at hydraulic.fracturing@epa.gov; or you may send written comments to Jill Dean, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Mailcode 4606M, Washington, DC 20460.