

# **NJ Governor Proposes 1-Year Gas Drilling Ban**

ANGELA DELLI SANTI, Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — Gov. Chris Christie has recommended a one-year ban on a natural gas drilling process known as hydraulic fracturing, disappointing environmentalists who had hoped New Jersey would become the first state to permanently forbid the technique.

A coalition representing natural gas interests applauded the decision as economically responsible.

The state Legislature passed a bill in June to permanently ban the procedure known as "fracking." On Thursday, Christie sent it back with a conditional veto recommending that the ban be lifted in a year.

The legislation is largely symbolic because there's not enough natural gas under New Jersey to drill for, experts say. Opponents, however, say New Jersey could send a strong message about the importance of ensuring water quality by enacting an outright ban.

It's not clear whether the Legislature will sign off on Christie's change. The permanent ban had bipartisan support and passed by wide enough margins in both the Senate and Assembly for an override vote to succeed. However, the Legislature has so far been unable to overturn any of Christie's vetoes because no Republican has been willing to cross him.

"A one-year moratorium will do little on this issue, other than provide another year for us to see how dangerous fracking is," the two bill sponsors, Sen. Bob Gordon and Assemblywoman Connie Wagner, said in a joint statement after the veto was announced. "Fracking represents the greatest threat to our drinking water we have seen in generations."

Christie said he shared many of the legislators' concerns, but wants to give state environmental regulators more time to evaluate the potential environmental impact of fracking. Federal studies are also ongoing.

"The potential environmental concerns with fracking in our state must be studied and weighed carefully against the potential benefits of increasing access to natural gas," Christie said in a statement. "I believe a one-year moratorium on fracking in New Jersey while the issue is studied ... is the most prudent, responsible and balanced course of action."

The governor declined to answer questions about his decision during a news conference Thursday on hurricane preparedness, saying he wanted the focus to remain on the approaching storm.

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Hydraulic fracturing releases trapped gas by pumping huge volumes of water, laced with much smaller amounts of chemicals and sand, underground. Natural gas drillers say the process isn't harmful to the environment.

"We believe that New Jersey can benefit directly from domestic production of natural gas," said Jim Benton, who heads the New Jersey Petroleum Council. "It has been the type of game-changer that really bodes well for New Jersey — and that's not at the cost of our environment."

The New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce quickly announced its support for Christie's action. Chairman Jeff Scheininger noted that Christie has proposed an energy master plan that relies on having a steady supply of natural gas. A permanent ban would have made it harder to meet those goals, he said.

Environmental groups say fracking produces wastewater that contains toxins, radioactive substances and carcinogenic chemicals.

In New York, Attorney General Eric Schneiderman has sued the federal government to compel a full environmental review of proposed regulations for fracking for natural gas in the Delaware River Basin. The suit claims the Delaware River Basin Commission, with approval of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other federal agencies, proposed drilling regulations without doing a full review required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

The commission, which has representatives from New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware and the federal government, regulates water use in a 13,539-square-mile area that supplies drinking water to Philadelphia and half the population of New York City. It has imposed a moratorium on gas drilling while it establishes regulations for the industry. Final rules aren't expected until this fall.

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*Associated Press reporter Josh Lederman in Trenton contributed to this report.*

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