Cracks Emerge in GOP over Hydraulic Fracturing

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — When it comes to the controversial gas drilling technique known as hydraulic fracturing, the Republican Party itself appears fractured — especially in the critical swing state of Ohio.

Super Tuesday voters are choosing among a field of GOP contenders who all support less regulation of the drilling technique, even as some Republicans in the state call for greater oversight and new taxes on companies using it to harvest natural gas.

Republican Gov. John Kasich plans to introduce a new energy policy next week that would place a new tax on hydraulic fracturing to reduce personal income taxes for the state's residents. Many Republicans in Congress and on the presidential campaign trail oppose any new taxes or the elimination of tax breaks for oil and gas companies.

Kasich has also placed a moratorium on the deep injection of drilling wastes for disposal within five miles of a well site, a process that is being studied for possible links to an unusual series of earthquakes in Ohio. The process is separate from fracking — which is the pumping of water, chemicals and sand underground to open fissures in rock to allow oil and gas to flow to the surface — but it is expected to grow as fracking in neighboring states sends more waste into Ohio.

In addition, the state's Republican attorney general, Mike DeWine, has called for steeper fines on the growing industry and for drillers to disclose the chemicals they're injecting, actions that would bring Ohio in line with the toughest regulations in the nation.

"I would hope everyone wants to protect the environment. That's not the issue," DeWine said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We need to do it right, we need to do it with safeguards, but we need to do it."

That stance has DeWine, who has endorsed former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, sounding more like President Barack Obama than the Republicans making a run for the White House. Obama has called for a cautious approach to more oil and gas drilling.

Under Obama, the Environmental Protection Agency has proposed to regulate drilling wastewater and control the gases that leak from natural gas wells, steps the oil industry and Republicans say will discourage more energy production. It's also studying whether fracking causes water contamination, as environmentalists claim.

In a 28-minute energy ad, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich cites the EPA's pending fracking regulations and Obama's calls to end tax breaks for oil companies

as an "assault on American energy."

Santorum, whose home state of Pennsylvania is one of the epicenters for the U.S. fracking boom and the complaints about its environmental effects, has outright dismissed such concerns. At a campaign stop in Oklahoma, he said the drilling technique has become "the new boogeyman" for environmentalists.

"It's the new way to try and scare you," Santorum said. "Let me tell you what is going to happen — nothing is going to happen."

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney makes the technique more a states' rights issue, saying he'd halt any federal effort to regulate the process. He accuses the EPA of a power grab to "move the whole economy away from oil, gas, coal, nuclear and push it into the renewables."

"States have been managing this, managed it well," Romney said in an interview.

For Republicans at the local level, the issue is more delicate.

Texas, a Republican stronghold, has issued rules requiring companies to disclose the chemicals they use in fracking. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who has endorsed Romney for president, has recommended a one-year ban on hydraulic fracturing.

"I think when you get to the state level, Republican governors and legislatures are being a little more in tune to local concerns. ... It is a little closer to the action, and they have to proceed cautiously," said David Jenkins of Republicans for Environmental Protection. "If the gas industry wants to maximize potential of shale gas, they need to do it right. It doesn't take but a few legitimately proven horror stories to make that a tough political situation for gas companies."

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Cappiello reported from Washington.

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