300-Foot Buffer Proposed for Ohio Park Drilling

BARBARA RODRIGUEZ,Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — An Ohio natural resource agency's proposed guidelines for drilling in state parks would require natural gas and oil companies to stay at least 300 feet — the length of a football field — from campgrounds, certain waterways and sites deemed historically or archaeologically valuable.

Documents on proposed guidelines were released by the state Department of Natural Resources this week after the Ohio chapter of the Sierra Club filed a lawsuit claiming the agency ignored repeated requests by the group to review them.

The 89-page report lists the "best management practices" on site restoration and other topics, and guidelines for emergency and pollution incidents. Other proposals include state approval before companies could store drilling waste in pits and an agreement on the locations of all drilling equipment.

The agency also released proposals for drilling leases. They show possible arrangements for companies interested in drilling directly below or drilling horizontally from land adjacent to property with oil and gas deposits.

Agency spokesman Carlo LoParo, who said the 300-foot buffer proposal would be applied above ground, said there are no specific policy decisions yet on what state land will be put up for competitive bids for drilling. But he emphasized that hundreds of other state properties besides state parks would be considered. He said a five-member commission that will be appointed later this summer will select the properties and lease the mineral rights, though the state can move forward with plans before the commission is appointed.

Natural gas drillers in Ohio are active in the eastern part of the state, going after deposits in the underground Utica Shale. The state passed a law in September that opened its parks and other state-owned lands for drilling, and officials have been developing leasing terms for drilling companies.

Jed Thorp, the Sierra Club's Ohio chapter manager, said the proposals are inadequate. He said he's hopeful state lawmakers will eventually reverse the law.

"When people go to a state park, they don't want to see fracking, or hear fracking, or smell fracking," he said in a statement. "They want to relax."

Thorp also said the Sierra Club, which filed its lawsuit Monday, won't drop its suit. He said the agency failed to follow the state's public records law by ignoring requests for the documents as far back as October.

LoParo called the group's reaction premature because the documents are draft proposals that don't apply to a particular circumstance. He said the documents

were only completed this week.

"Public records are something that we take very seriously," he said. "You can't provide something that you don't have. And these documents were provided as soon as they were available."

Opponents say they're concerned about the environmental impact of the drilling, which includes hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking." The process involves drillers blasting millions of gallons of water, sand and chemicals deep underground to break up rock deposits.

Supporters of the law say there's a potentially vast reservoir of oil and gas in the Utica Shale, which lies below the Marcellus Shale, where oil companies in Pennsylvania have drilled thousands of wells in search of natural gas and oil.

But natural gas drilling has become a contentious issue in Pennsylvania, where public health advocates have criticized a new law that will limit accessible medical information on illnesses that may be related to gas drilling. It takes effect April 14.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, more than 130 bills have been recently introduced in 24 states to address fracking. It includes a range of topics like waste treatment, disposal regulations and requirements to publicly disclose the composition of fracturing fluid chemicals. At least nine states have proposed fracking suspensions or studies on their impact.

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