'Fracking' Advocates, Critics Gearing Up in Michigan

JEFF KAROUB, Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — The fight over hydraulic fracturing is coming to Michigan, along with a significant environmental test for the Great Lakes state's Republican governor.

House Democrats plan to discuss a bill Wednesday that would further regulate what is known as "fracking," a method of extracting natural gas from underground. The House's natural gas subcommittee released a report Tuesday encouraging more natural gas production, arguing it can provide energy independence and high-wage jobs.

The discussion has been muted in Michigan compared with other states' furious debates. Energy companies have used the technology in Michigan since the 1960s, and a few exploratory wells have been drilled into a shale formation covering much of the northern Lower Peninsula.

The technique involves pumping huge volumes of water laced with chemicals and sand at high pressure into wells that can extend a mile or more underground. The process opens fissures in shale deposits, releasing trapped gas so it can be pumped to the surface.

State regulators and industry representatives say the process is environmentally sound, but critics say it can pollute surface and ground water and threatening air and soil quality.

Bill Rustem, Gov. Rick Snyder's senior policy adviser, said the administration will review the report and bill. Still, Rustem said, Michigan has tough laws related to energy exploration and sees that continuing.

"Michigan is already ahead of the rest of the country as far as natural gas," he said.

The subcommittee's report, which says "the natural gas renaissance is upon us," calls for legislation that would streamline permitting, transportation and storage rules; and reduce the $1,000 application and $2 per acre storage fees for all commodities on state land.

The committee also wants lawmakers to impose an end date on the natural gas energy conservation and efficiency program enacted as part of broader clean and renewable energy standards in 2008.

"Michigan's natural gas industry is poised for incredible growth," the report said. "However, without proper procedures to take advantage of this growth, Michigan

could fall behind in maximizing the benefits of this boom."

The Democratic legislation being introduced calls for companies involved in fracking to fully disclose the chemicals and additives used in their production processes in order to receive a permit from the state Department of Environmental Quality. It also would require companies to use the least harmful chemicals possible and give public notice and comment for permit applications.

"Deep hydraulic fracturing ... is different from what we've had in the past 30-40 years — it's deeper, more heavy-duty and more intense," said Ann Arbor Democrat Jeff Irwin, one of the bill's backers. "We need to make sure the regulation matches the activity."

Current regulations set by the DEQ require gas well operators to document where they plan to get fresh water by using a computer screening device to make sure neither surface waters nor wells are harmed. Companies also are required to disclose more data about operations and chemicals.

Environmentalists say those requirements were good first steps, but don't go far enough.

In other states, critics have claimed that hydraulic fracturing fluids tainted with toxins, such as formaldehyde and acids, have migrated into ground water. State environmental officials say that can't happen in Michigan because the shale that contains natural gas is far below the water table.

"Fifty years, 12,000 wells, no problem," said DEQ spokesman Brad Wurfel. "We have a great regulatory structure and a good program in Michigan."

The ultimate decision on whether to expand or regulate rests with Snyder, who campaigned on a 10-point plan that included preserving the state's natural resources and protecting its environment.

Rustem said Snyder as governor "had a pretty good test" of his environmental commitment last fall, when he vetoed a measure approved by the GOP-led Michigan Legislature that, in most cases, would have prevented state government agencies from adopting rules that are more stringent than federal rules.

Snyder's move was applauded by environmental groups that had worried the measure eventually might have weakened the state's approach to protecting the Great Lakes and the environment.

"I think he's absolutely committed to the responsible management of natural resources in Michigan," Rustem said.

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