

Job Seekers Gather for NY Gas-Drilling Job Fair

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BINGHAMTON, N.Y. (AP) — People lined up Wednesday for New York's first job fair in the shale gas-drilling industry, as prospective employers pinned their hopes on the state lifting a four-year-old ban on hydraulic fracturing for natural gas.

Even ahead of the 3 p.m. start at Broome Community College, job seekers and exhibitors gathered outside the doors. Business reps ranged from titans of the oil and gas industry to scientists, wetland specialists and experts on construction site erosion control. More than 700 people turned out for leads on a job.

The college is in the sweet spot of the Marcellus Shale region, a gas-rich formation that underlies parts of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia.

"I'm optimistic in saying the industry will be working in New York state fairly soon," said Broome County legislator Steve Herz, an event organizer.

Horizontal drilling and high-volume hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, made it economically feasible to extract oil and gas from the shale. But in New York, concerns about potential contamination of New York City's water supply led to a ban in 2008, pending revised regulations to address the impacts of fracking. The method unlocks the gas by fracturing the shale with an injection of water mixed with chemicals and sand.

And even if drilling is allowed in the state, the industry is already seeing retrenchment as supplies near capacity and prices fall to a 10-year low.

Still, companies and workers in the state's Southern Tier are benefiting from the boom 20 miles south of Binghamton in Pennsylvania. Thousands of wells were drilled in that state since Marcellus Shale exploration began there about five years ago.

"Neil Guiles of Vestal Asphalt is a perfect example of a New York company benefiting from what's happening in Pennsylvania," Herz said. "His business has tripled, and he's made major capital investments."

New York counties along the state border are reaping benefits. Chemung County Executive Thomas Santulli said the county has avoided property tax increases for seven years and leads the state in the growth of sales tax and hotel tax revenue, thanks to Pennsylvania gas workers filling the county's hotels, bars and stores.

While industry proponents tout the economic benefits of shale gas drilling, broad opposition paints a bleak picture of adverse health impacts, an industrialized landscape and a boom-bust economy.

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Broome County Executive Debra Preston acknowledged the controversy, with some towns enacting bans against it, but said she remains confident the state Department of Environmental Conservation will complete its review and allow some shale drilling to begin this year.

"It's really going to help all the businesses in the region, from hotels and restaurants to places like Lowes, Home Depot, and clothing stores," she said at the job fair.

A study by Penn State Extension and Penn College found that each Marcellus gas well generates 12 full-time jobs for at least 20 years. But it also cautioned against focusing only on jobs or tax revenue from gas drilling. It said no economic study has included the potential costs, such as the effects on existing businesses losing employees and the costs of environmental damage and cleanup.

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