

Landowners Plan to Frack Using Liquid Propane

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ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — An upstate New York landowners group may partner with a Canadian company that uses liquid propane instead of controversial water-based hydraulic fracturing to get natural gas flowing into wells.

Chris Denton, the attorney representing the 2,000-member Tioga County Landowners Association, said Thursday that leaders of the group have reached a deal with Calgary-based GasFrac, which has used liquefied propane gas to frack wells in Canada, Texas and Colorado.

"This is no reflection on hydrofracking; we've always explored alternatives," Denton said. GasFrac came to New York last year and made presentations on its technology, which is reputed to give better natural gas yields than hydrofracking. "We were impressed. We did our research. If it's as viable as we think, it would be wonderful."

Department of Environmental Conservation spokeswoman Emily DeSantis said the agency has met with the Tioga County group to discuss the plan.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

Hydraulic fracturing involves injecting a well with millions of gallons of chemically treated water at high pressure to fracture shale and release trapped natural gas. The process is at the center of a heated debate over whether it could contaminate groundwater with harmful chemicals. New York has refused to permit the process since it began an environmental review in 2008. A decision on whether to allow it is expected in several months.

An alternative technology developed by GasFrac Energy Services does away with the need for water. Instead, it uses a thick gel made from propane. Like the water-based process, the gel carries sand or other particles to hold open the cracks blasted into the shale when the gel is injected at high pressure.

The company says it has done 1,200 fracking projects in 400 wells from Canada to south Texas.

GasFrac says its technology eliminates many of the concerns surrounding hydraulic fracturing, such as the millions of gallons of water required and the cost and difficulty of disposing of toxic wastewater after the fracking is done. With propane, all of the fracking gel is recaptured and reused.

The wells would be drilled by eCORP, a Houston-based energy company that also develops natural gas storage facilities, including the Stagecoach Storage project in Tioga County. The company partnered with GasFrac in February to introduce propane fracking to Europe.

New York Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, who has advocated alternative fracking agents, said propane fracking would eliminate concern over water withdrawals and wastewater treatment. But it wouldn't solve the problem of methane gas seepage, which has contaminated drinking water wells in Pennsylvania.

Denton says the landowners group hopes to prove the natural gas production potential in the region.

The agreement between the landowners group's leaders and GasFrac is still awaiting approval from the rest of the group's members, which is expected in about two weeks, said GasFrac spokesman Kyle Ward.

Although using propane instead of high volumes of water would mean the landowners wouldn't have to wait for updated regulations to be approved, Denton said that wasn't the intent of choosing the new technology.

DeSantis said fracking with propane would be subject to current permitting rules set in 1992.

"If we receive a formal application, we will follow the current permitting process," DeSantis said. However, the DEC review may require additional information and analysis, possibly including an environmental impact study, which is costly and time-consuming.

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"I can't see any legal basis for permitting it under the current regulatory structure without a full environmental review," said Kate Sinding, a lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council who's on a state advisory panel related to the new regulations. "Clearly, there are environmental concerns that are going to be different from those from fracking with water, and they have to be evaluated before they can proceed."

In the updated environmental review and permitting guidelines awaiting final approval, DEC describes the propane technology briefly in a section on "green" or non-chemical fracturing alternatives.

"Using propane not only minimizes formation damage, but also eliminates the need to source water for hydraulic fracturing, recover flowback fluids to the surface, and dispose of flowback fluids," the DEC review says. It adds that the technology greatly reduces the truck traffic to and from the well site and is less likely to bring up radioactive elements that occur naturally in the shale.

New York has three underground liquid propane storage facilities and associated wells for the injection and withdrawal of propane. They have a total capacity of 150 million gallons and are in Cortland, Schuyler and Steuben counties.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/20/2013 - 4:21pm):

http://www.chem.info/news/2012/04/landowners-plan-frack-using-liquid-propane?qt-recent_content=0