

Environmentalists Criticize Drilling Rules

JULIE CARR SMYTH, Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Environmental advocates were among dozens of witnesses lining up to testify Monday on a bill laying out Ohio's new regulations for horizontal shale drilling and the use of renewable energy.

The testimony before the House Public Utilities Committee was part of a debate on a wide-ranging energy bill that passed the Ohio Senate last week with support of Republicans and some Democrats.

Concern remains among environmental groups.

The bill requires that well operators disclose chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing, a technique that involves the high-pressure injection of water and chemicals into the ground to split rock apart and release natural gas or oil. Environmentalists say details will be scant, however, and reporting will come only after wells have been drilled.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, meanwhile, has criticized the bill for removing the public's ability to appeal state-issued drilling permits.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources says the rules are among the toughest in the nation.

Ohio senators passed the new energy bill Tuesday, sending it to the House.

Besides creating the new hydraulic fracturing rules, it adjust Ohio's renewable energy standard to include waste heat such as that generated from factory smokestacks.

Supporters said the bill balances environment, public health and safety, and commerce by expanding chemical disclosure and water testing requirements.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich, a Republican, backs the bill as a responsible compromise between environmental protection and policies friendly to the state's developing shale drilling industry.

It requires well operators to disclose the location they'll draw water from for blasting into the well, as well as the rate and volume at which they'll withdraw it.

The legislation further requires well operators to disclose all chemicals that will come into contact with human water supplies during the drilling operation, though not the specific recipe. Water samples must also be taken at all wells within 1,500 feet of any proposed horizontal well.

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But environmental groups say the legislation is riddled with loopholes.

Rick Sahli, an environmental lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said language in the bill allows well operators to report water withdrawal data "to the best of their knowledge," for example.

It retains an Ohio "mandatory pooling" law that gives drillers the opportunity to access oil and gas under a landowners' property against their will, if enough neighbors agree to it to satisfy a state review board.

Sahli said a provision prohibits medical professionals who access proprietary chemical information about the wells from disclosing that information outside of treating individual patients. He said the wording would prevent a doctor from alerting local health departments and first responders.

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