Bass Fishing & Gas Drilling Converge in Pittsburgh

KEVIN BEGOS, Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Bass fishing, gas drilling and downtown Pittsburgh collided at a professional fishing tournament last week, and the unlikely partnership prompted cheers and concerns from anglers, environmentalists and the general public.

The Marcellus Shale Coalition 3 Rivers Challenge ran from Thursday to Saturday, as pro and amateur bass and walleye fishermen enthusiastically prowled the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers in search of a big catch.

"It was a brainchild of our land affairs committee," said Kathryn Klaber, president of the gas drilling coalition, who noted that many people in the industry are avid outdoorsmen.

One of the fishermen at the event said that even having a tournament in Pittsburgh is a sign of progress.

"I can remember I won a tournament 15 years ago, on the Ohio River, and I won it with two fish," said Vic Vatalaro, an Akron, Ohio, resident who's fished the rivers in the region for years. Now, he said, there are many more fish in the river, and they're much bigger. "The water's just definitely better. You can see its cleaner," he said.

Vatalaro said the outboard motors in his industry have gotten much cleaner over the last 10 years, and he thinks the shale gas boom is another example of how technology can help reduce pollution and thus improve the environment.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, has made it possible to tap into deep reserves of oil and gas but has also raised concerns about pollution. Large volumes of water, along with sand and hazardous chemicals, are injected underground to break rock apart and free the oil and gas. Contaminated wastewater from the process can leak from faulty well casings into aquifers, but it's often difficult to trace underground sources of pollution. Some studies also have shown air quality problems around gas wells, while others have indicated no problems.

Rick Lorson, the area fisheries manager for the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, agreed that the rivers were in far worse shape decades ago.

"It definitely did hit bottom in the 1960s through the early '70s," Lorson said. "The rivers have really tremendously improved over time."

Fisheries biologists still have concerns, such as old coal mine drainage, stormwater, sewage and industrial effluent. "We don't want to suggest that everything is taken

care of," he added.

Some people at the event weren't pleased to see that a gas drilling group was the main sponsor.

"That kind of put a damper on things. We didn't pick up any of the freebies they were giving out," said Katie Ketcham, an area resident who stopped by the riverwalk with her family. "It definitely disappointed me that they were the ones sponsoring this. I'm against drilling."

Regulators contend that overall, water and air pollution problems are rare, but environmental groups and some scientists say there hasn't been enough research on those issues. The industry and many federal and state officials say the practice is safe when done properly, and many rules on air pollution and disclosure of the chemicals used in fracking are being strengthened.

Jeff McCauley, who was working at a booth for a local environmental group, said he sees both sides of the issue.

"I see natural gas as a stepping stone to pure, clean energy. I want the best for the environment," he said.

McCauley said he thinks renewable energy is great, but it's just not ready to meet the vast power needs of the region or the nation. He added that natural gas is a cleaner-burning fuel than coal or oil and said the industry "is creating jobs for people."

Christina Handley, president of the Allegheny Aquatic Alliance, a local water conservation and protection group that had a booth at the tournament, said the gas drilling industry still hasn't eased her concerns.

"I want a lot more information," she said, adding that for now she opposes it and feels it has developed too fast. "It's so new; we really don't know the long-term effects."

Lorson said the Fish and Boat Commission monitor water quality, aquatic biology and fish species. And they're keeping an eye out for drilling impacts.

In 2010, the Monongahela River started to show very high levels of salty bromides, and one source was a new surge of wastewater from gas drilling. But in 2011, state officials and many in the industry backed new regulations and a voluntary ban on taking the waste to municipal treatment plants, and the bromide levels appear to have dropped.

"It's certainly something that we still have concerns over. However, the monitoring is continuing to escalate," Lorson said of the bromides, adding that some water quality issues are far more basic.

"Whether it be pipelines or well pads, there's a lot of soil being disturbed, and it's on

hillsides," Lorson said. That soil can end up in creeks, streams and ultimately the three big rivers.

"Sedimentation is our No. 1 pollution problem nationwide and particularly in Pennsylvania it's a chronic thing," he said, noting that gas drilling is hardly the only culprit. Many other industrial, agricultural and even residential activities contribute to the problem, he said.

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