Groups Deliver Cases of Comments on Gas Regs

MARY ESCH, Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — As Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration nears completion of regulations that could lift a 4 1/2-year-old ban on shale gas drilling in New York, opposition groups have ramped up efforts to persuade the governor to say no to fracking.

Environmental, health and community groups opposed to shale gas drilling and hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," say they collected more than 200,000 comments during an intense 30-day effort featuring online coaching and comment-writing workshops at churches, community centers, food co-ops, coffee shops and holiday house parties from New York City to Buffalo. They gave cases of comments to regulators on Friday, the last day to comment on proposed drilling rules.

Adding star power to the opposition were Yoko Ono and her son, Sean Lennon, who

urged Cuomo to reject fracking.

Industry representatives were also delivering comments to the Department of Environmental Conservation, arguing that the proposed rules are so strict they'll effectively prevent drilling in New York's part of the Marcellus Shale formation.

DEC must read and respond to the comments. The agency received 66,000 comments during a four-month comment period on the earlier version of the regulations and the 1,500-page environmental impact study, and took most of 2012 to read, categorize and respond to them.

DEC has a deadline of the end of February to finalize the regulations. Otherwise it has to draft new regulations and hold additional hearings, potentially adding months onto the process.

Fracking, a technology that releases gas from shale by injecting a well with millions of gallons of chemically treated water and sand, has made it possible to tap into deep reserves of oil and gas but also has raised concerns about pollution. Regulators contend that water and air pollution problems are rare, but environmental groups and some scientists say there hasn't been enough research on those issues.

The technology has drawn intense scrutiny since the focus of gas drilling companies has shifted in recent years to the Marcellus Shale, a massive rock formation underlying New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia.

"We're delivering these comments to DEC, but they're very much directed at Gov. Cuomo," said John Armstrong of New Yorkers Against Fracking. "We think this is truly a statement to the governor that he has a responsibility to follow through on his promise and base the decision to frack or not to frack on the science."

Armstrong said the comment letters "are very clear that no regulation can make this safe, and they should ban it."

Ono and Lennon lead the group Artists Against Fracking.

Albany lawyer Tom West said he'll deliver comments he's prepared for drilling industry clients on Friday. He said the regulations are excessively strict, with numerous arbitrary provisions that make it impossible to site a well in many areas.

"The bottom line is, there are many additional requirements that have been piled onto the proposal from 2011 that don't have a factual or scientific basis and will make it very difficult to drill in New York," West said. "Industry can only take so much. We're willing to live within a high environmental bar, but it has to be attainable."

"The enviros will get what they want, very limited drilling," West said. "Landowners will be left out in the cold, and there will be very little economic development in the Southern Tier," the area of New York north of the Pennsylvania state line where drilling most likely would take place.

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