Sierra Club Blasts New Plan to Improve Fracking

KEVIN BEGOS,Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — The Sierra Club and some other environmental groups are harshly criticizing a new partnership that aims to create tough new standards for fracking.

The criticism Thursday came a day after two of the nation's biggest oil and gas companies made peace with some national and regional environmental groups, agreeing to go through an independent review of their shale oil and gas drilling operations in the Northeast.

If Shell Oil, Chevron Appalachia and other companies are found to be abiding by a list of stringent measures to protect the air and water from pollution, they will receive the blessing of the new Pittsburgh-based Center for Sustainable Shale Development, created by environmentalists and the energy industry.

But some are questioning whether a partnership between environmentalists and the oil and gas industry should exist at all.

"We know that our continued reliance on dirty, dangerous fossil fuels, like natural gas, will not solve the climate crisis, even with the best controls in place," said Deb Nardone, a Sierra Club campaign director, who called the new plan "akin to slapping a Band-Aid on a gaping wound."

"The majority of natural gas must stay in the ground if we want any chance of avoiding climate disaster," Nardone said.

An Ohio environmental group wasn't happy, either.

"This deal in no way represents the interests or agreement of the people being harmed by fracking in Ohio," said Sandy Buchanan, the director of Ohio Citizen Action. "A hydraulic fracturing peace treaty? Not so fast, my friend."

In addition to Shell and Chevron, the participants in the new center include the Environmental Defense Fund, the Heinz Endowments, the Clean Air Task Force, EQT Corp. and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council. The organizers hope to recruit new members, too.

The project will cover Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio — where a frenzy of drilling is under way in the huge, gas-rich Marcellus and Utica Shale formations. If fracking is approved in New York and other states in the East that have put a hold on new drilling, it could apply there, too.

The Environmental Defense Fund responded to the Sierra Club criticism by noting that the new plan is meant to be a complement to strong regulations, not a replacement.

"*When an opportunity comes to engage companies constructively and hold them to a higher standard, we're going to take that opportunity every time," said Mark Brownstein, EDF associate vice president. He added that the new partnership with oil and gas companies comes with "a heavy dose of trust but verify" reality.*

Brownstein noted that extensive oil and gas fracking is already taking place in many states and that it makes sense to improve standards in those places in every way possible.

During fracking, large volumes of water, along with sand and hazardous chemicals, are injected into the ground to break rock apart and free the oil and gas. In some places, the practice has been blamed for air pollution and gas leaks that have ruined well water, but President Barack Obama's administration and many state regulators say the practice is safe when done properly.

Last year, the Sierra Club acknowledged that from 2007 to 2010, it had secretly accepted about $26 million from individuals or subsidies connected to Chesapeake Energy, one of the leaders in the fracking boom. After deciding it would no longer take such donations, the group launched a campaign that is critical of the gas drilling industry.

Meanwhile, Pennsylvania regulators have endorsed the new plan.

Department of Environmental Protection spokesman Kevin Sunday said the agency "applauds this collaboration between natural gas operators and non-governmental organizations. The best practices this group's document speaks to — better on-site waste management practices, more recycling of wastewater, progressive fracturing fluid disclosure, and protecting private water supplies — are vital concepts of responsible gas development. "

Sunday said the state has toughened standards over the last few years, and he praised "a cooperative spirit among oil and gas stakeholders to continually raise the bar of performance."

Another person who was involved with the creation of the Pittsburgh center suggested that the Sierra Club and others are missing a key point.

John Hanger, the former director of the Pennsylvania DEP, wrote in a blog post Thursday that "ultimately, it will matter not that individual gas producers like or dislike CSSD. What will be decisive is that consumers of gas from Washington DC to Maine and from New York to Chicago will demand that their gas is certified as sustainably managed."

Other members of the Pittsburgh center note that independent certification programs in forestry and seafood have had some success. The first such program — Underwriters Laboratory — has been certifying electrical products since 1894.

The Pittsburgh project will be overseen by a 12-member board consisting of four seats for environmentalists, four for industry and four for independent figures, including former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and Christine Todd Whitman, the former New Jersey governor and Environmental Protection Agency chief.

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