Tenn. University Proposes Fracking on Its Own Land

Kristin M. Hall, Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — The University of Tennessee wants to allow hydraulic fracturing to extract natural gas on a state-owned tract of rolling woodland, raising the hackles of environmentalists who question its stated goal of raising funds to research the environmental impact of such drilling.

With debate over "fracking" continuing, the unique proposal is being considered when many universities say they don't have enough money to properly study the environmental implications of an increasingly popular and lucrative method for energy companies to remove gas or oil from rock formations by forcing liquids underground at high pressure.

"We have not been able to find any instances of a university drilling on their land and funding their research with revenues from the drilling activities," said Gwen Parker, a Nashville-based staff attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center. Her group is taking a lead in trying to block the move, saying the university's proposal raises ethical concerns.

The university is requesting permission from the state to allow an outside company to drill on about 8,000 acres of mature woodlands it maintains as an outdoor laboratory in the Cumberland Plateau — all while performing research on the effects on water quality, air quality and ground impacts.

University officials argue that because the property is state-owned, they can maintain control over the drilling project, and provide independent scientific results in an area of the industry where many environmental questions remain.

On Friday, the university will present its proposal on the project to a subcommittee of State Building Commission, which will decide whether to allow the university to seek bids from companies. Environmental groups are planning a rally and news conference before the 2 p.m. session.

Parker called the proposal a "fundamental conflict of interest." She argued that the university risks its credibility by funding research with the very proceeds from such drilling. Other environmental groups have joined in the opposition, although Gov. Bill Haslam is supportive.

Environmentalists also argue that preservation of the particular forest tract in question is critical because it is one of the few mature forests still intact in the state's Cumberland Mountains region.

Without an appraisal, it was unclear how much revenues such drilling could yield

though some said it could potentially be lucrative in the range of millions of dollars annually.

Shale formations undergird a wide swath of Appalachia, crossing several states. Hydraulic fracturing has touched off a boom of sorts, making enormous reserves of natural gas accessible where previous methods could not. Natural gas is extracted using large volumes of water, plus sand and chemicals, injected deep underground to break rock apart, freeing the gas. But environmentalists say the fluids could pollute water sources and methane leaks could cause air pollution.

"There are questions surrounding natural gas extraction and we have the facilities, and we have the faculty, so have obligation to investigate in an unbiased, scientific way to provide those answers," said Dr. Bill Brown, dean for research and director of the University of Tennessee Agricultural Experiment Station.

Other universities that have studied fracking have faced criticism about their scientific findings after discovering that researchers had ties to the energy industry.

The University of Texas at Austin recently said it would create a group of outside experts to review that school's Energy Institute, which issued a report on environmental effects from gas without disclosing that the lead researcher was also being paid hundreds of thousands of dollars by an energy company.

And in May, a report from New York's University at Buffalo generated similar controversy because of the researcher's ties to the gas industry.

Brown said the faculty who would work on the project if it's approved would be screened for outside relationships with industry contacts. He said other funding sources, such as federal or state grants, would be sought. He also rejected any notion that possible involvement by an energy company in the project would affect research findings.

"We need to get past this notion that if the university works with an industry, that somehow we are compromised or tainted," Brown said. "Ultimately, many of the technologies that our faculty develops are going to be delivered to the market through the industry."

Parker, meanwhile, said the university has attempted to push this proposal through the approval process without getting an independent appraisal of the value of the property or the natural gas below ground. She also said there hasn't been enough time to get details about the project.

Pittsburgh-based Consol Energy Inc. hired Bryan Kaegi, a fundraiser for Haslam and other prominent Tennessee Republicans, to help shepherd the proposal through the approval process.

Kaegi, who has not registered as a lobbyist, said in the correspondence with school officials that he had met with the governor and environmental officials to make the case for the program. Kaegi did not return messages seeking comment.

Brown said if the subcommittee approves the university's request to seek bids, they will have to evaluate those and go back to the State Building Commission for final approval.

___

On the Web:

University of Tennessee's proposal to allow drilling:
https://ag.tennessee.edu/Pages/Gas-and-Oil.aspx

___

Associated Press writer Erik Schelzig in Nashville contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/25/2015 - 8:56am*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2013/03/tenn-university-proposes-fracking-its-own-land