Ill. House Committee OKs Fracking Regulatory Bill

REGINA GARCIA CANO, Associated Press

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) — A proposal that aims to create thousands of jobs in southern Illinois by kick-starting high-volume oil and gas drilling cleared a top committee Tuesday, sending it on to the House floor.

The House Executive Committee voted 11-0 to send the full House a bill meant to regulate hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," though it was unclear when the chamber would vote on it.

The measure has been touted by proponents as creating the strictest fracking regulations in the nation, although opponents worry the practice could lead to water pollution.

Rep. John Bradley, the Marion Democrat who negotiated the bill with the industry, environmental groups and regulators, labeled the agreement among stakeholders as historic. He said the safety and environmental protections in the bill are unprecedented.

"I live in southern Illinois. I drink the water in southern Illinois. My children drink the water in southern Illinois. My neighbors drink the water in southern Illinois," Bradley told the members of the committee. "Our first and foremost ... effort, intent in everything we did and every negotiation we had, was first and foremost that we are going to protect the ground water in southern Illinois."

Fracking uses high-pressure mixtures of water, sand or gravel and chemicals to crack rock formations deep underground and release oil and natural gas.

Among the bill's requirements is that companies disclose fracking chemicals and test water before and after drilling. It also holds them liable for contamination.

But critics, who have called for a fracking moratorium, say there is no scientific proof that the practice can be done safely. They say it could cause air and water pollution and deplete water resources.

"It's a model for anti-scientific decision making," said Sandra Steingraber, an Illinois native and founder of New Yorkers Against Fracking.

Steingraber, who testified on behalf of the Illinois Coalition for a Moratorium on Fracking, added that the practice "turns communities into industrial zones" and that the state is in such a dire economic straits that it will be unable to enforce the regulations spelled out in the proposal.

Among the opponents of the bill who testified Tuesday was Josh Fox, director of the anti-fracking, Oscar-nominated documentary "Gasland."

After lawmakers voted on the regulatory proposal, several of the opponents in the audience yelled "shame, shame."

Energy companies, which already have leased hundreds of thousands of acres in southern Illinois, have been waiting for regulatory certainty before starting to drill. But there also is nothing on the books in Illinois to stop them. Bills to establish a two-year moratorium on the practice have languished in House and Senate committees.

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The bill is SB1715.

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Contact Regina Garcia Cano at https://www.twitter.com/reginagarciakNO [2]

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