Anti-fracking Groups Rally Outside NY Capitol

MICHAEL VIRTANEN, Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — About 2,000 opponents of a natural-gas drilling process that involves blasting chemical-laden water deep into the ground rallied outside New York's Capitol on Monday as a new statewide poll showed a slight increase among voters who are against it.

The Siena College poll of about 800 registered voters showed 44 percent opposed to drilling and 37 percent supporting it, compared with 41 percent to 39 percent last month.

"It's now a seven-point margin in opposition," pollster Steven Greenberg said. "That's the largest it's been in the past year."

The demonstrators cheered the announcement of the poll results while urging Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo to permanently ban the natural-gas drilling process, called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, in the state, saying it will harm the environment.

"There is no compromising our water, our air, our health and our future," organizer Julia Walsh told demonstrators, noting they were working against the oil and gas industry lobby.

Pending legislation would impose a moratorium, but rally organizers acknowledged it's unlikely to be enacted now.

The demonstrators called for Cuomo's administration to further increase the state's renewable-energy sources, including a proposal that wind power provide 40 percent of its needs by 2030.

Energy industry officials say fracking has been used safely for decades, and they want Cuomo to end the state's five-year ban on shale gas development and allow drilling in much of the state's Southern Tier.

Cuomo's decision is on hold while the state continues to study fracking's potential impact.

Singer Natalie Merchant performed "New York is Your Land," a variation on a Woody Guthrie folk song, and the crowd joined, ending with the chorus, "New York was meant to be frack-free."

Farmer Beth Miller, from Bath, in the Southern Tier, said many of her neighbors in the economically struggling region have signed drilling leases.

"I'm here because I'm a mother and our livelihood is tied to the land," Miller said. "First of all, we just can't live there if our water goes bad."

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 trapped inside. In some areas, fracking has been blamed for air pollution and gas leaks that have ruined well water, but the Obama administration and many state regulators say the practice is safe when done properly.

Poll opposition was 52 percent upstate, the location of potential fracking zones, with a 44 percent plurality in heavily Democratic New York City against it. The June 9-13 poll of 804 registered voters indicated a clear divide between Democrats against drilling and Republicans in favor. The poll claimed a margin of error of nearly 4 percentage points.

The New York State Petroleum Council said drilling presents a major economic opportunity. It cited a report from HIS Global Insight that jobs tied specifically to drilling and hydraulic fracturing are expected to total 2.5 million by 2015, with many new jobs going to women.

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