Mich. Democrats Introduce Fracking Safety Bills

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TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) — A group of Democrats in Michigan's Republican-controlled House introduced a package of bills Thursday that would tighten state regulation of hydraulic fracturing, which releases natural gas trapped in deep underground rock formations.

Sponsors said the measures would bring more safety, accountability and transparency to the process widely known as "fracking," although the state Department of Environmental Quality said it already has solid rules in place. Meanwhile, a group that wants to ban fracking said the bills don't go far enough.

Fracking has become a hot political issue in a number of states. It involves pumping huge volumes of water laced with chemicals and sand at high pressure into wells that can extend a mile or more underground. State regulators and industry representatives say the process is environmentally sound, but critics say it can pollute surface and ground water and threaten air and soil quality.

The DEQ says fracking has been used in about 12,000 Michigan wells over the past 50 years without harming the environment. But the industry is stepping up drilling in shale formations deeper than most of those targeted before, requiring greater volumes of water.

"Our legislation provides a common-sense approach that balances the needs of Michiganders and our natural resources against the interests of major corporations," said Rep. Ellen Cogen Lipton, a Democrat from Huntington Woods.

One of the bills would let local governments regulate operation and location of fracking wells. Others would require disclosure of chemicals used in the process; increase the required distance between fracking operations and residential areas, as well as certain public places; make drilling companies liable if fracking chemicals are found in drinking water; and allow local governments to request a public hearing in communities where companies seek fracking permits from the state.

DEQ spokesman Brad Wurfel said the agency updated its fracking rules in 2011 and has been meeting with environmental and industry groups. University of Michigan experts are leading a study of fracking's effects on the environmental, economic and social effects of fracking.

"We've got a regulatory structure that has protected Michigan's land and water from hydraulic fracturing for decades," Wurfel said. "At the same time, we recognize there is growing public concern about potential environmental damage out there. We are very open to a conversation about further refining our regulations to address legitimate concerns."

Deb Muchmore, spokeswoman for the Michigan Oil and Gas Association, an industry group, said fracking is "a proven safe technology, but improvements are continually being made that result in our ability to even more effectively produce the natural gas that 80 percent of Michigan homeowners use in ways that fulfill our responsibility to safeguard Michigan's environment."

Environmental groups including the Sierra Club and Clean Water Action said the bills were a good first step that would give communities a greater role in decisions about gas development. Some activists are gathering petition signatures seeking a statewide referendum on whether to ban fracking in Michigan, which Tia Lebherz of Food & Water Watch Michigan said that was the only acceptable course.

"Simply put: There is no such thing as safe fracking," she said.

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