NY Gov. Won't Join Obama at Fracking Hotbed Sites

MICHAEL GORMLEY, Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Gov. Andrew Cuomo will avoid a potentially dicey political conflict by not accompanying President Barack Obama to parts of upstate New York roiled over the state's ban on hydraulic fracturing for natural gas.

Obama supports the technology as an economic windfall that helps make the country more energy independent. He's expected to find supporters as well as protesters from environmental groups when he visits Syracuse and Binghamton late this week. Parts of central New York and the Southern Tier are on the gas-rich Marcellus Shale formation, where energy companies want to drill with the promise of a boom to the long economically distressed area.

Obama's two-day bus tour will begin Thursday and hit the University at Buffalo, followed by stops in Syracuse, Binghamton and northeastern Pennsylvania. Cuomo said Monday he will meet Obama when the president flies into Buffalo but won't appear in Syracuse or Binghamton.

The governor has postponed a decision on whether to allow fracking, a method of extracting oil and gas from deep underground by pumping huge amounts of water, sand and chemicals at high pressures to break up rock formations. Cuomo says he's waiting for a study by Health Commissioner Dr. Nirav Shah, which the Cuomo administration has, since February, promised was just weeks away.

The New Yorkers Against Fracking group plan demonstrations in Buffalo and Syracuse, with its largest show of opposition in Binghamton.

"Governor Cuomo should continue to stand up to the gas industry and show the leadership that President Obama has failed to show," said Alex Beauchamp of Food and Water Watch and New Yorkers Against Fracking. He said he believes fracking could lead to gas leaks that would exacerbate global warming, a claim that fracking supporters dispute.

Cuomo noted Monday that some wine producers in the Finger Lakes region, where he has toured recently, are concerned about any contamination of the soil and groundwater and "are all against fracking, and they make that point."

Cuomo said Obama's view that gas drilling in shale has economic benefits, however, is "inarguable."

"It has obvious economic benefits," Cuomo said on public radio's "Capitol Pressroom."

"Every area that has participated in fracking will say it has increased commercial activity and it has an economic boost," Cuomo said. "The question is, is there a cost to the environment, to health, et cetera. That's what has to be assessed and that's what has to be weighed and that's what we're doing."

He won't provide a timeframe for the decision, even as gas production exceeds projections in Pennsylvania's section of the Marcellus and environmental activists ramp up opposition with a growing group of A-list actors and musicians.

"I've been on the road continuing the work," Shah said in an interview Friday. "And it is a work in progress."

The issue is still difficult politically, a Siena College poll shows. The Aug. 12 poll of 814 voters shows 41 percent support drilling, with 42 opposed, which was a statistical tie.

There was no immediate comment from the Independent Oil & Gas Association based outside Buffalo. The group has mounted an advertising campaign with other business groups around the theme: "There's only one thing standing between the state of New York and thousands of new jobs."

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AP Writer Michael Virtanen contributed to this report.

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