Fracking Opponents Focus On National Forest

Steve Szotak, AP

Opponents of opening the George Washington National Forest to fracking for natural gas have released a report that they say proves the drilling practice would be harmful to the largest federal forest on the East Coast. The report was issued by Environment Virginia ahead of the U.S. Forest Service's release later this fall of a management plan for the 1.1-million-acre forest. Called "Fracking by the Numbers," the study looks at the impact of fracking on a national basis, concluding that more than 360,000 U.S. acres have been damaged by fracking since 2005.

Sarah Bucci, the group's campaign director, said "fracking has already taken a dirty and destructive toll on our environment in other parts of the country. The George Washington, a favorite destination among Virginians to hike, camp and fish, is too precious a place to risk the scale and scope of pollution that comes with this dirty drilling practice," Bucci said in a statement. Energy in Depth, a petroleum industry-affiliated program, called the report "scripted talking points from activists who are solely interested in shutting down development."

The report is "completely devoid of any meaningful context and is purely about throwing large numbers out there and hoping the emphasis will be on those numbers, not what they actually mean," said Katie Brown, a spokeswoman. The Forest Service, which expects to release the management plan next month after several delays, initially proposed a ban on fracking in the forest, which is primarily located along Virginia's western frontier but also overlaps the state line into West Virginia. The proposal, however, was met with opposition by the energy industry. Opponents fear the Forest Service will bow to the industry pressure. The Forest Service has said it has not reached a decision on fracking.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is a drilling technique using water, abrasives and chemicals to extract natural gas laced through shale deposits. Much of the drilling is occurring in the Marcellus Shale formation stretching from upstate New York to West Virginia, yielding more than $10 billion worth of gas annually. A sliver of the Marcellus deposit extends into northwest Virginia. Drilling opponents, including the Southern Environmental Law Center, contend drilling would leave an industrial footprint on the forest, harming its recreational attractions and wildlife.

The Environment Virginia report tallies up the number of fracking wells nationwide, the toxic waste created by the drilling, land damage by drilling, and wastewater storage and pollution impacts, among other data. The group said drilling in the national forest would endanger the headwaters of the Potomac River, which provides drinking water to millions in the region. The science on the impact of fracking has not been conclusive.

A study released last month, for instance, concluded that drilling and fracking don't seem to spew immense amounts of the greenhouse gas methane into the air as

some have feared. Another study, released in August in Pennsylvania, challenged the industry position that no one suffers but also suggested the problems may not be as widespread as some critics claim. Environment Virginia issued the report in Alexandria with representatives from the American Hiking Society and Potomac Riverkeeper, Inc.

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