NY Energy Plan Falls Short On Fracking

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ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York's newly released energy plan calls for increased use of renewable energy and clean technology and anticipates reduced utility bills and a more flexible distribution grid, but takes no position on hydraulic fracturing for natural gas in the fertile Marcellus Shale.

While the proposal of the State Energy Planning Board calls for expanding the use of natural gas, instead of oil, for heating and power generation to reduce emissions of climate-changing carbon dioxide, it also notes that state officials are reviewing health and environmental concerns regarding fracking.

The shale formation extends from southern New York to West Virginia and has made abundant, low-cost natural gas available to New York through pipelines from gas fields in Pennsylvania. But New York has had a moratorium on fracking since the state launched an environmental review in 2008. Fracking involves injecting a gas well with a mixture of water and chemicals at high pressure to crack surrounding rock and release trapped gas.

The board's long-term plan, which was supposed to be completed in September 2012, was released Tuesday for a 60-day public comment period. Six public hearings will be held around the state, and a final version is expected to be adopted in the spring.

Environmental groups have called on Gov. Andrew Cuomo to ban fracking, citing potential hazardous spillsand disruption to community life from heavy industrial activity. Hundreds of anti-fracking protesters rallied outside Cuomo's annual State-of-the-State address Wednesday in Albany, but the governor made no mention of gas drilling in his speech.

Over the past year, Cuomo has said repeatedly that he's waiting for his health commissioner to complete a review, with no deadline for a decision.

Karen Moreau, executive director of the state Petroleum Council, said Wednesday that the absence of any mention of shale gas production in the energy plan is consistent with the Cuomo administration's clamp-down on official comments on fracking.

"It's ironic, however, that the metrics suggested in New York's 2014 energy plan for improving energy affordability, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and providing a more resilient and flexible grid are all made possible by the abundant supply of natural gas produced by Marcellus Shale development in neighboring states," Moreau said in an email.

Conor Bambrick of Environmental Advocates praised the plan for stressing decreased reliance on fossil fuels and increased use of solar and wind energy.

"We're very pleased to see that one of the first commitments in the plan is sticking with the state goal of reducing carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050," Bambrick said.

The plan is intended to improve the reliability of energy systems in New York, reduce the overall cost of energy, minimize public health and environmental impacts and maximize energy efficiency to meet a projected growth in demand. It is to serve as guidance for the public and private sectors on energy-related matters.

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