

Gas Opponents: Shale Operations A Road Wrecker Policymakers Gather Input On Plan To Explore Bergton Site

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By Jeremy Hunt

HARRISONBURG - Ray Renaud says his rural West Virginia community experienced a kind of industrial revolution over the past few years.

Wetzel County, W.Va., has 20 active natural gas wells, miles of pipeline and trucks - lots of big trucks - all of which came about after an energy company explored for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale field about 3½ years ago, Renaud said.

"We've become an industrial zone," says Renaud, of the Wetzel County Action Group, an organization he formed in response to Marcellus Shale development. "Nobody envisioned this."

Renaud spoke to about 50 people gathered at Elks Lodge No. 450 in Harrisonburg on Wednesday at a meeting sponsored by Shenandoah Valley Network, a nonprofit conservation organization.

Large, heavy tractor-trailers carrying equipment, sand and chemicals tear up the roads in Wetzel County, Renaud said, and they also pose safety hazards to other motorists. He showed a video in which 47 big rigs drove past his house in an hour.

Renaud, a volunteer firefighter and first-responder, said the tractor-trailers are often involved in crashes that shut down roads in the rural community for hours. Sometimes, wrecks lead to diesel fuel spills.

Renaud said some people have benefited from the development, such as property owners who lease their mineral rights. Governments collect tax revenues, and workers patronize local businesses.

And, he said, the company in Wetzel County, Chesapeake Energy, has tried to make accommodations to lessen negative impacts. Regardless, he said Chesapeake, its subcontractors and other gas companies in the area often don't follow the rules.

"I actually don't assign a lot of blame to the gas company," he said. "My concentration has been on local and state government."

Maribeth Anderson, a spokeswoman for Chesapeake, said the company takes responsibility for the effect it has on roadways. Chesapeake works closely with the West Virginia Department of Highways, Anderson said, and either performs the work itself or contracts road maintenance and repair.

Anderson also said the company's staff have worked with Wetzel County residents to resolve issues resulting from its operations, and formed a community advisory panel.

Application Prompts Meeting

Wednesday's meeting was held to educate conservation groups and local government officials about Marcellus production, says Kim Sandum, executive director of the Rockingham County Community Alliance for Preservation.

Officials with Rockingham County and the towns of Broadway and Timberville attended, in addition to conservationists.

The informational meeting was prompted by a Houston energy company's application for a special-use permit application to explore for natural gas in northwestern Rockingham County. Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC wants to build an exploratory well in Bergton.

According to its application, Carrizo would seek to extract natural gas from the site depending on how much it finds.

Controversy has sprung up in recent years concerning gas production in Marcellus, a sedimentary formation that underlies much of West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. A small portion of the formation stretches into northwestern Virginia.

Opponents decry the techniques that make natural gas extraction from shale profitable for energy companies, which hail the practice as safe and a way of lessening the nation's dependence on foreign oil. Proponents also tout natural gas as a more environmentally friendly fossil fuel alternative to oil and coal.

To access the gas, companies drill down vertically and then horizontally through the formation. The typical Marcellus well is about a mile deep.

Once horizontal drilling is complete, energy companies use hydraulic fracturing, or hydrofracking, to break up the tight formation and release natural gas, which consists mainly of methane. A mixture of water, sand and a small amount of chemicals is pumped into the formation to crack it.

The Environmental Protection Agency recently began a study to evaluate the process. EPA's review comes after a 2004 study it conducted has been criticized for being incomplete.

Migration of methane gas has been blamed for polluting groundwater, most notably in Pennsylvania, the hub of Marcellus production. Explosions have even been reported. Proponents of the technique say such problems are the result of human error or negligence. Further, they point out that methane migration is a widespread problem in Pennsylvania not specific to natural gas extraction.

How to dispose of the wastewater presents even more problems, says Walter Ebaugh, a hydrogeologist from State College, Pa., who says it takes between 2 million and 9 million gallons to fracture treat a well once. One well bore could be fracture treated two to 10 times, Ebaugh said.

The wastewater - which contains salt, carcinogens and other compounds - can't be treated at typical, publicly owned treatment plants because it's too volatile, he said. In previous interviews, representatives of Carrizo said wastewater would be transported to a facility in Pennsylvania for treatment if an arrangement can't be reached with the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Regional Sewer Authority in Mount Crawford.

Looking At Pros And Cons

Sandum said the local conservation groups involved in Wednesday's meeting would

work to decide how to move forward as Rockingham County officials consider Carrizo's application. The Board of Supervisors tabled the special-use permit application at its February meeting so staff and board members could obtain more information about the process.

Board Chairman Pablo Cuevas, who attended Wednesday's workshop, said he and the staff are continuing their assessment. Cuevas would initiate action on the permit request because the proposed Bergton drill site is in his district.

"I'm looking at all the pros and cons," he said. "There is a lot to be considered."

Timberville Town Manager Austin Garber said he's concerned with water quality and a large volume of tractor-trailers driving into the area.

"The big concern now is truck traffic," said Garber, adding that tractor-trailers could travel from Interstate 81 through the Broadway-Timberville area to get to the Bergton site. "Those trucks are going to have to come in from somewhere."

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