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Hiring Board Eliminated In Draft Marcellus Bill

Staff
State Capitol

A legislative committee has voted to change the way Marcellus shale drilling inspectors are hired.

The Joint Select Committee on Marcellus shale issues voted 5-4 Monday at the state capitol to eliminate the West Virginia Oil and Gas Inspectors' Examining Board.

The committee is working on proposed legislation that the full legislature may consider in a special session before the end of the year.

Proponents of the change say the industry controls the board and shouldn't be allowed to control the hiring of inspectors. The state Department of Environmental Protection supports the change.

Del. Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, says that's good enough for her.

"The agency has said that this board is duplicative and performs no valuable function," she said. "I think we should move forward and reinsert the normal process for hiring."

The proposed bill would put the DEP personnel board in charge as it is with other positions in the agency.

State Senator Doug Facemire voted against the proposal. He says there's no proof the current set up has resulted in below-par inspectors.

"I don't think it's a case of the fox guarding the hen house," Facemire, D-Braxton said. "I think that this board has taken this role very seriously and has done a good job in qualifying people."

But state DEP Secretary Randy Huffman has previously said the examining board takes too long to make the hires and many times the inspectors end up being hired by the industry, which can offer better pay.

The DEP says it plans to make a number of additional hires to keep up with the Marcellus shale business.

Sen. Facemire says the board currently has a requirement that only people with several years of experience can be hired as inspectors. He says he's concerned that would go away with the DEP in charge.

"If we eliminate this board we won't have the same quality inspectors at the get-go," he said.

The legislative committee passed two other amendments to the proposed legislation. One would increase the public notification by companies planning to seek a Marcellus shale drilling permit. The other adds the possibility of additional public hearings.

The committee will meet again at 2 o'clock Wednesday afternoon.