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WV, PA Watershed Compact wants legislation to limit negative impacts of drilling

By Ben Adducchio



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January 6, 2011 · A group concerned about water resources in north central West Virginia and southwest Pennsylvania is trying to persuade legislators to adopt gas drilling standards in West Virginia to limit the negative impacts of drilling.

The West Virginia, Pennsylvania Monongahela Area Watersheds Compact also wants more local citizens hired to work on gas drilling job sites.

The group met yesterday for the fifth time in Morgantown. More than 60 people, representing nearly 50 different watershed organizations, as well as industry and state officials, filled the Morgantown Airport Annex.

The group passed three position statements. One calls for state legislation in West Virginia and Pennsylvania to limit negative impacts of gas drilling.

Another encourages the hiring of trained local citizens to do the work needed at drilling sites.

The third asks for all other state citizens to get involved and petition legislators to adopt stricter regulations.

Barry Pallay is the group's co-chair.

"It's extremely important to have legislation, certainly minimum standards passed; to protect unlimited water withdrawals, to protect the public and citizens, so that we can carry on that industry, but we don't repeat the problems of the past," he said.

The number of state oil and gas inspectors continues to be a concern.

Pallay says the state has about 17 inspectors to oversee thousands of well sites.

He says it's unfeasible for 17 inspectors to handle that workload.

"Even if they double the number of inspectors, you can't possibly cover the kind of inspections that need to be done," he said.

"We don't have new standards for this new industry. We don't have minimum standards for total dissolved solids," he said, "even if we were to adopt the standards in this legislative session, the problem is without sufficient inspectors, it's not meaningful because you can't cover all the issues that need to be addressed."

Pallay and others at the meeting are striving to get this message to West Virginia legislators as they go into a new session later this month. And at least one lawmaker is listening.

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Monongalia County Delegate Barbara Evans **Fleischauer** spoke at the compact meeting and says she understands the message.

"We have 60 days to pass a bill, a couple of bills, and get the budget done, and what we want to do is get at least some parts of the good parts of these bills into regulation, and to get money in there for inspectors," she said.

"I think that's really critical."

Previous attempts to create a state water quality standard, as well as new standards on gas drilling, haven't been successful in the state legislature.

It's a fact Barry Pally knows too well, but he says he's staying optimistic.

"We'll try to work together so that hopefully we can have something passed," he said.

"This is the third time; hopefully the third time is the charm."

Two bills are being developed to regulate drilling.

One is from the Department of Environmental Protection; the other by the Judiciary Committees in the State House and Senate.

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