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Gas drilling forums wrap up

By Denise Richardson

Staff Writer

ONEONTA _ Speakers opposed to natural-gas drilling listed health and pollution risks for about 150 people at the Parish Center of St. Mary's Church on Monday night.

Meanwhile, the state Department of Environmental Conservation reports more drilling applications have been filed this year as it continues working on an environmental review procedure for drillers. And a local conservation group reports that the number of parcels in Otsego County leased for possible drilling also has increased this year.

Monday's session on the risks associated with drilling for natural gas was the third in a series presented by Sustainable Otsego, an advocacy group. Adrian Kuzminski, a member and moderator, said about 65 people attended the meeting in Cherry Valley on Friday and about 100 were at the session in Cooperstown on Sunday.

Speakers and members of Sustainable Otsego are particularly concerned about the practice of hydrofracking, which requires pumping water into the ground under high pressure to fracture rock and release gas. The process can allow toxic chemicals to seep from deep underground into aquifers.

According to geologists, Otsego, Delaware and Chenango counties are potentially rich in gas deposited in the Marcellus Shale formation below ground. Groups representing landowners and gas company representatives have said the findings may make some landowners wealthy.

Sustainable Otsego, which formed last year, has asked the Otsego County Board of Representatives to take steps to ensure that gas drilling does not ruin water supplies. The speakers on Monday reviewed potential health risks from chemicals used, noise and air pollution and the impact of trucking wastewater from proposed drilling sites, among many other issues.

Panelists at the forums included Ron Bishop, a chemistry lecturer at the State University College at Oneonta; James Herman, a town of Hartwick property owner; and Colleen Blacklock, an Oneonta resident who has been researching the effect of gas drilling on agriculture.

Speakers during the two-hour meeting illustrated their program with projected pictures of drilling sites in other areas, leaking wastewater pools, roads damaged by trucks and some explosions.

Some attendees expressed surprise about the "compelling details" presented at the sessions, Kuzminski said Monday night.

"People are astonished at the scale and consequences of this," he said. Kuzminski said he was pleased with overall turnout at the meetings but disappointed by lack of attendance by elected leaders from towns, the county and state.

Municipal governments have a responsibility to look at possible regulations for the proposed natural gas drilling, Kuzminski said, and another purpose of the meetings was to encourage residents to contact their elected leaders.

The Otsego County Conservation Association reports that 8.7 percent of acreage in Otsego County is leased for natural gas drilling, according to a media release from the group issued Monday. The rate is up from 7 percent reported previously by OCCA.

OCCA said since the beginning of the year, an additional 204 parcels have been signed, totaling 12,190 acres. Parcels now under lease contract number 839, with total acreage rising to 54,443 acres.

Blacklock said with 50,000 acres leased, that could mean 13,000 wells.

Test wells several thousand feet deep have already been drilled in Springfield and Cherry Valley.

The DEC is responsible for regulating the development and production of oil and gas resources in the state, including drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale formation. The DEC has determined the process requires review under the State Environmental Quality Review Act, or SEQRA.

The state DEC has been working on a Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement to address advances in technology, including in horizontal drilling, since the initial GEIS was finalized in 1992.

The DEC has completed the scoping process, a prelude to the a draft Environmental Impact Statement, which may be ready for public comment in the spring, said Yancey Roy, DEC spokesman.

The DEC has received 31 applications for horizontal drilling wells, Roy said, and the breakdown by county is Delaware 23; Tioga, four; Chenango two, and Chemung, two.

The DEC held six public hearings during the scoping process, including a meeting in Oneonta in December. Roy said the scope represents a table of contents for the environmental study, and in the scope, the DEC has said it will study:

The effectiveness of regulations in other oil and gas producing states where high-volume hydraulic fracturing of shale and other low-permeability reservoirs is used.

Setbacks for multi-well sites and high-volume hydraulic fracturing operations from private dwellings or buildings, surface waterbodies, private water wells and springs used for domestic water supply.

Potential requirements for private water well sampling, testing and monitoring by gas well operators.

Feasibility of requiring the use of green or non-chemical fracturing technology.

Mechanisms to require notification, review and DEC approval of re-fracturing operations.

Specific air quality topics.

Evaluation of a phased permitting alternatives.

Roy said the draft SGEIS is expected to be ready for public comment by late spring and the DEC is on track to complete the SGEIS in the summer.

OCCA's map of leased sites was among illustrations used Monday night. The map is created from data available at the Otsego County Real Property Tax Office, the OCCA release said, and it shows properties whose owners have signed leases for natural gas drilling with gas and oil companies.

"The startling thing about this map is that we're looking at nearly 10 percent of our land holdings in this county being signed up for leasing," said Erik Miller, OCCA executive director, said in a prepared statement.

"The map shows the impact visually of gas leasing on a community. We produced it as a tool for local governments to be able to really see what's going on in their territory and to consider drafting land use regulations or modify existing ones to address concerns,"

Martha Clarvoe, OCCA president, said the association is concerned about the quantity of land under lease because there is nothing in local, county or state law that ``makes us think horizontal drilling is an environmentally safe practice." The map may be viewed on the OCCA website, www.occainfo.org.

Co-sponsors of the Sustainable Otsego forums included the Otsego County Gas Group, Citizens Concerned for Otego, the Environmental Work Group, Oneonta Healthy Communities Campaign and the Chenango-Delaware-Otsego Gas Group.

DEC Drilling Info

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has information about the Marcellus Shale formation, the scoping process and other topics related to drilling for natural gas and the horizontal drilling process.

Two DEC sites feature:

Transcripts of scoping meetings, including the Dec. 2 session in Oneonta:
www.dec.ny.gov/energy/51422.html.

The final scope for the Supplemental GEIS is at www.dec.ny.gov/energy/45912.html. Copies also are available to read at DEC Region 4, Stamford Sub-office, 65561 State Highway 10, Suite 1, Stamford, contact Kent Sanders, 652-3722; Huntington Memorial Library, 62 Chestnut St., Oneonta; and William B. Ogden Free Library, 42 Gardner Place, Walton.