

N.Y. will make fracking health call 'in weeks'

By The Associated Press

Posted Mar 13, 2013 @ 08:29 PM



Catherine Leyden

Gov. Andrew Cuomo: "Nobody ever said that we were waiting for the studies to be finished."

Albany — New York's health commissioner said Monday he never intended to wait for completion of any of the pending gas drilling studies, which could take years, and instead plans a recommendation to the governor "in weeks" on whether the state should approve hydraulic fracturing.

Health Commissioner Nirav Shah also said he met with researchers from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Geisinger Health System in Pennsylvania within the past two weeks.

A person close to Gov. Andrew Cuomo had told The Associated Press in February that the governor discussed the Geisinger health study as key research for his decision and helped cool momentum toward making a decision to allow a limited number of test wells that would be closely monitored. Preliminary results were expected in less than a year.

Environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who had spoken to Cuomo about the study, said in an interview that he believes the Geisinger review is pivotal.

Last week, however, Geisinger said it will take years for the results of their studies to be complete.

"Nobody ever said that we were waiting for the studies to be finished," Cuomo said Monday. "The Department of Health was going to be looking at those studies and see if there was anything constructive in those studies."

Instead, Cuomo said they would discuss early findings with some researchers.

Cuomo will make a decision on whether to allow the potentially lucrative drilling in the economically distressed Southern Tier. But he has faced increasing opposition from environmentalists who claim "fracking" will threaten public health and drinking water.

"We will call them up, look at them, talk to them and find out," Cuomo said.

"Maybe they are useless, in which case they are useless. Maybe they have some information that is instructive, in which case we will use the information."

That's what Shah said he did with the Geisinger and the EPA.

"I anticipate we will be done in the next few weeks," Shah told reporters at Cuomo's news conference Monday. He said he sees no scenario in which New York would delay a decision for the final results of the studies.

The Geisinger study will look at detailed health histories of hundreds of thousands of patients who live near wells and other facilities that are producing natural gas from the same Marcellus Shale formation that New York would tap. Unlike most studies funded by advocates or opponents of hydrofracking, this study would be funded by the Sunbury, Pa.-based Degenstein Foundation, which is not seen as having an ideological bent.

Cuomo also said Monday that he doesn't believe bills will pass the legislature seeking to delay a decision until those studies are completed. The Assembly's Democratic majority wants a two-year moratorium, while the Independent Democratic Conference, which shares control of the Senate, has a bill that would delay action until the Geisinger report and lesser studies are complete.

"I don't believe that bill passes," said Cuomo, who insists science will determine his choice. "We're not looking for a political resolution here."