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Panel: Important deadlines loom in New York fracking debate

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JOHNSON CITY — After more than four years of watching lawmakers and regulators progress toward a decision on whether to permit hydraulic fracturing in New York, area leaders on both sides of the debate are bracing for the endgame that many expect will unfold in 2013.

During a two-hour panel discussion Thursday morning, four experts on the controversial natural gas drilling technique, commonly known as hydrofracking, explained that important deadlines are looming in coming weeks and should provide a much clearer picture on the industry's fate in New York.

By late February, the state Department of Environmental Conservation will likely clear some of the final hurdles left before completing its environmental review of hydrofracking, which started in 2008.

Along with the outcome of several other key factors involved, the DEC findings will define the hydrofracking regulations that are expected to guide the decision by state lawmakers, who have already identified the Southern Tier as among the regions where drilling may be allowed.

But even if all the pieces fall into place, the experts on the panel discussion in Johnson City warned that everything from legal challenges to legislative actions could delay issuing permits.

"It's going to be really interesting between now and Feb. 27," said panelist Walter Hang, president of an Ithaca-based environmental database firm, Toxics Targeting.

Hang said that results of the DEC environmental impact review — along with a health review that was added amid mounting pressures from groups opposed to hydrofracking — will determine whether permits get issued. He believes, however, that more work is needed and called for the DEC to begin the review process anew.

Attorney Yvonne Hennessey, a partner at the Hiscock & Barclay firm in Albany representing clients in the natural gas industry, agreed that vital decisions on allowing hydrofracking are likely to be made by late February, though she believes this will just mark the beginning of "legal battles" filed by parties on both sides of the debate.

Hennessey added that even if lawmakers begin to issue permits to gas companies, many of which already hold drilling leases with property owners in the Southern Tier, that 2013 would likely only see a couple of operations get underway, primarily drilling wells to test the conditions in the gas-rich Marcellus Shale in the region.

The panel discussion was moderated by Press & Sun-Bulletin reporter Steve Reilly and Gannett Albany Bureau correspondent Jon Campbell.

The other panelists included: Attorney Robert Wedlake, a partner at Hinman, Howard & Kattell firm in Binghamton representing six area landowner coalitions; and Tom Wilbur, a former Press & Sun-Bulletin reporter and author of *Under the Surface*, a narrative about the shale gas rush in New York and Pennsylvania.