

Obama heads to center of N.Y. fracking debate

By Jon Campbell

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ALBANY — When he visits the campus of Binghamton University on Friday, President Barack Obama will step into a region that has long been viewed as the epicenter of New York's five-year stalemate over shale gas drilling.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a fellow Democrat, will not be joining him. Plenty of protesters — on both sides of the issue — will.

Opponents and advocates of hydraulic fracturing for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale say they're gearing up for a significant turnout during Obama's upstate trip, which will take him to Buffalo and Syracuse on Thursday before hitting suburban Binghamton and Scranton, Pa., on Friday.

"Swarms of New Yorkers are going to be out to greet the president," said John Armstrong,

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Obama

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spokesman for Frack Action, a group opposed to hydrofracking. "We're protesting his stance on fracking, and the fact that he's turned a blind eye to the science and the ill health effects affecting thousands of Americans."

Obama has been a supporter of shale gas drilling and fracking, using the grand stage of his State of the Union address this year to pledge to "encourage" a "natural-gas boom" that has "led to cleaner power and greater energy independence."

Cuomo, meanwhile, has taken a middle-of-the-road stance while his administration continues a multi-layered study that, when completed, is meant to ultimately determine whether New York will open its doors to the gas industry. No permits for high-volume hydrofracking have been issued in the state.

On Monday, Cuomo said Obama's position on the economic and energy benefits of fracking are "inarguable," but whether they outweigh the potential environmental detriments is still an open question.

"Every area that has participated in fracking will tell you that it's increased commercial ac-

tivity and it has an economic boost effect," Cuomo said on "The Capitol Pressroom," a public-radio program. "The question is: Is there a cost to the environment, et cetera? And that's what has to be assessed, and that's what has to be weighed, and that's what we're going through now."

Cuomo said he will greet Obama when he lands in Buffalo, but won't accompany the president on his Friday stops. Instead, Cuomo said, he'll be helping his twin daughters get ready for their first college semesters.

Obama, meanwhile, will have a clear view of both sides of the fracking debate during his Friday tour stops.

Binghamton has been a focal point in New York, both because of its long-struggling economy and its location within what is believed to be one of the more lucrative portions of the Marcellus Shale formation.

On his way to Scranton, Obama's bus will pass through Susquehanna County, Pa., where there are 632 active gas wells, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. It's also home to Dimock Township, a small town that received international headlines in 2009 when several homes near a drilling rig saw their water contaminated with

methane.

Scott Kurkoski, an attorney for the pro-fracking Joint Landowners Coalition of New York, said the Binghamton-based group will have a "very good presence during the president's visit so the nation understands that a very big part of New York is in favor of natural-gas development."

"The president, the (Environmental Protection Agency) and, frankly, every governor in every oil-and-gas-producing state in the country is going in the direction we would like them to go," Kurkoski said. "It's just that New York is not going there yet."

Armstrong said protesters would be outside of all three of Obama's events in New York. Walter Hang, the owner of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting and a well-known organizer in the Southern Tier, said he's focusing his efforts on the Binghamton University stop.

In an e-mail Monday to thousands of fracking critics, Hang said the Obama visit will "dwarf all others in importance."

"We're working with as many groups as we possibly can to make this a national event on shale fracking," Hang said. "We're going to be putting out the call to action to groups in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and all over New York."