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Fracking Opponents In New York Say Gasland Movies Help

By Karen DeWitt



Monday night brought the TV premiere of Gasland II , a sequel to the original anti- hydro fracking movie. In New York, where Governor Cuomo’s decision on fracking is still on hold, both opponents and supporters of fracking say the films have helped frame the debate.

Gasland filmmaker Josh Fox is a frequent participant in anti fracking rallies at the State Capitol that routinely attract hundreds of people.

Walter Hang, with the group Toxics Targeting, says in New York, the 2010 Gasland movie contributed to what has now become a five year delay on whether to allow hydro fracking in the state.

“It did help to make the grass roots organizing much more effective,” Hang said. “There’s no dispute about that.”

But he says the stage had already been set. In 2008 former Governor Eliot Spitzer’s Environmental Commissioner and former Assemblyman Pete Grannis, along with Spitzer’s top environmental advisor, Judith Enck, who now is with the EPA, wanted more time to study the potential effects of fracking.

“They said ‘we don’t really have sufficient experience with this’,” Hang said. “ ‘Let’s take a cautious approach’”.

Hang says five years later, that moratorium is essentially still in effect.

Karen Moreau, with the Petroleum Council, calls the Gasland films “propaganda”, but she admits they’ve had an impact. And she says it’s been harder to present her side of the debate.

“It’s more challenging,” Moreau said. “You’re basically coming in behind a film like Gasland where someone lights a faucet on fire. Even though that has nothing to do with fracking.”

She says 29 other states allow fracking and the drilling has been conducted safely.

Supporters and opponents of fracking may not agree on the interpretation of the events portrayed in the Gasland movies, but they do both believe Governor Cuomo and his top aides are stalling on making a decision on whether to go forward with the gas drilling process.

Nearly a year ago Cuomo’s Health Commissioner said he would be conducting a health review.

The health department contracted with three health experts, and the Commissioner, Dr. Nirav Shah, has said he’s said they are looking at three major studies, that are in the beginning phases. But no other details have been released.

Hang, with Toxics Targeting, wants a comprehensive health assessment that is open to the public.

Moreau, with the Petroleum Council, says she’d like to see a more transparent process as well, perhaps an advisory group with industry representatives, environmentalists, and people in Marcellus Shale communities who could work together. She says the inertia by the Cuomo Administration is only increasing the polarization.

“It’s clearly a political decision at this point,” Moreau said.

Governor Cuomo has maintained that he will make his decision based solely on the science and the facts, not on emotion. He said recently that he agrees with President Obama that natural gas can be a “very effective fuel for this country”. But he says that’s not the same as saying it’s safe.

“What are the health or environmental consequences of that development?” Cuomo asked. “That’s a different issue from whether or not you think natural gas is good.”

Meanwhile, both sides continue to organize. Hang says since he began in 2009, more than 65 locally elected officials have joined in opposition to fracking . He’s currently working on a letter writing campaign to the Cuomo Administration.

“We’re pushing, pushing, pushing,” Hang said. “We’re not taking our foot off the gas pedal.”

Moreau says she’s also trying to educate the public about natural gas, which she says is much cleaner than other fossil fuels. She says she also tries to present the views of some New Yorkers that could benefit from drilling- the rural poor. She says she recently met a farmer who had run out of money, and had foreclosed on her home and farm while waiting for the state to decide.

“She had 40 acres with natural gas under the ground,” Moreau said. “She’s lost that.”

Governor Cuomo, when asked about the on going health study on fracking and his decision making process, replied that there’s “nothing new”.