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Actor Ruffalo among anti-fracking speakers at BU event

By Jon Campbell • jcampbell1@gannett.com • September 27, 2010, 10:40 pm

VESTAL -- Eight thousand it wasn't, but a standing-room-only crowd gathered Monday in Binghamton University's Mandela Room for a discussion on the risks of natural gas drilling featuring some of the loudest critics of the controversial hydraulic fracturing process.



Actor Mark Ruffalo answers questions from the media before the start of an information session about hydraulic fracturing Monday in the Mandela Room at Binghamton University in Vestal. Ruffalo was one of the guest speakers at the event. (REBECCA CATLETT/ Staff Photo)

The forum, organized by a BU student group, attracted about 400 people, the majority students with a handful of community activists and landowners.

Actor Mark Ruffalo was one of several who spoke passionately against fracking while rallying the attendees, many of whom sat behind their handheld digital cameras while the Sullivan County resident detailed his reservations about the drilling technique.

"I'm not a person who wants to take money from people. If you can do it and do it safely, then go ahead and do it," said Ruffalo, who has appeared in such films as *Shutter Island* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and has been an outspoken fracking critic. "But there just hasn't been a credible study on it. Would you take your daughter to the red-light district just because you've fallen on hard times?"

Ruffalo and other activists were scheduled to appear Aug. 12 at a rally on BU grounds outside of a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency meeting on its study of hydrofracking, a drilling technique in which a mix of water, sand and chemicals is blasted deep underground to break up shale formations and release natural gas. But the meeting was moved and postponed after the EPA couldn't come to a contract agreement with BU, which had estimated about 8,000 people could attend the hearing and rally.

While some students came to catch a glimpse of the Hollywood actor, many came to learn about the controversy surrounding the drilling process that has grabbed headlines across the state and nation.

"I've been hearing a lot about hydrofracking lately," said Sarah Lister, a BU junior from Oneonta. "We shouldn't be sacrificing our land for something that's going to destroy it. We only have so much of it, you know."

The forum attracted a small number of drilling supporters. Joint Landowners Coalition President Dan Fitzsimmons watched from the back of the room as did local landowners Victor Furman and Bryant La Tourette, who at one point was engaged in a spirited discussion with a BU student and hydrofracking opponent while the program moved along.

"It was a lot of propaganda," Fitzsimmons said. "The kids really don't know about this. They're looking for a cause, but the sad thing is they are getting a whole bunch of misinformation."

Julia Walsh, who has helped organize fracking rallies on New York college campuses and is a co-founder of the Ulster County-based group Frack Action, said the BU event was by far the largest.

"This is our future in New York state that's at risk," she said. "We have to step up and stand firm and tall together to battle this industry and to not let them step foot on our land."

Many of the speakers urged the campus community to stay involved.

"SUNY Binghamton was once an epicenter of student involvement across the country," said Walter Hang, an environmental database specialist and owner of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting. "And so we're really happy that you're all here, and we hope that we can teach you about hydrofracking and how to be effective advocates to try and stop this."