

Wayne National Forest holds fracking forum amidst protests



Messenger photo by John Halley

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Roxanne Groff questions Mark Storzer, of the Bureau of Land Management, during an informational event on fracking held Wednesday at Wayne National Forest headquarters between Nelsonville and The Plains.

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By **WILL DRABOLD** Special for The Messenger | [1 comment](#)

Around 50 people gathered yesterday to educate themselves on and protest possible fracking in the Wayne National Forest. Local activists and citizens began gathering at 3 p.m. yesterday at an open house put on by multiple government agencies and hosted at the Wayne National Forest headquarters between The Plains and Nelsonville. The purpose of the open house was to educate the public on the different agencies and regulations involved in drilling in a national forest.

Fracking — or horizontal fracturing — is the drilling method in which a hole is drilled thousands of feet below the surface, followed by the insertion of various chemicals to crack shale and release oil and gas for extraction.

The air and emotions inside the building were calm and cool, as small groups and individuals talked with representatives from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the Bureau of Land Management and the National Forest Service.

“When we were meeting with people ... well we found they’re concerned,” said Gary Chancey, Public Affairs Officer for the Wayne National Forest. “We’ve been meeting with people one-on-one. We noticed that there were gaps in what the public knew about how we conduct gas practices in the Wayne.”

Chancey added that this is the first time, to his knowledge, that an open house has ever happened at Wayne National Forest.

“People have expressed concern about it,” said Ann Carey, Director of the Wayne National Forest. “This is an opportunity for people to come and ask questions.” Only 12 vertical wells have been drilled in the forest in the last 6 years, Carey said, adding that the forest service doesn’t have the power to ban fracking in its forests. “We manage timber, water, soil and its all part of what we do,” Carey said.

While there have been no requests for fracking in the Wayne, Chancey said there is currently no ban either, adding that fracturing will not be happening soon.

“There may not be a full-blown Environmental Impact Study (EIS) for every application to drill, but the analysis we do is enough to cover the oil and gas impact,” Chancey said. “There is a great deal of oversight.”

Those outside the building, however, did not share the optimism in current regulations that government officials inside did.

“If they lease the property, it’s like playing roulette,” said Kathi Scali, a concerned Athens County resident. “Once you’ve leased the property, the public loses control.” Other activists indicated that the needs of the many come before the needs of the few. “People should not have the right to access their private mineral rights (in the Wayne,)” said Loraine McCosker, a member of the Ohio Sierra Club and local fracking organizer. “We need to protect our future. We’ve had 40 years to stop being dependent on oil and gas. We’re just getting deeper into the (oil and gas) puddle.”

While cordial conversations continued indoors, protesters and concerned citizens took to the microphone outside to express their opinions.

“We have to watch them. We have to be the watchdogs the agencies are not,” Theresa Mills, the Children’s Health Organizer for the Center of Health Environment and Justice, said over speakers to anti-fracking activists. “I’ve already looked at a paper (in the open house) and I’ve found two lies already. Pay attention and ask the hard questions people.” The fiery speech drew applause from the audience, which is demanding a full EIS under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) concerning the affects fracking could have on the Wayne.

“They haven’t been listening to us for the last six months,” said Heather Cantino, Chair of the Buckeye Forest Council, adding that the forest’s “Review of New Information” (also known as the reviewing of the forest plan) is not enough for the forest to legally make a decision on whether or not to frack. “This (open house) is just a ploy to once

again not listen to the community,” she said, in reference to the fact many activists wanted a public forum to be set up where their questions could be openly heard by all. Carey had no comment on whether or not a public forum would be set up in the future.

The latest EIS and forest plan took four years to put together and was last released in 2006, with a new one planned 10-15 years after that, said Aaron Burke, Forest Planner for the Wayne. “We’re still doing the forest plan review,” Burke said, which should be released soon. “Folks think the current forest plan is deficient. If (it is) found deficient, then there may be an EIS conducted.”

An EIS takes months at minimum to conduct, largely due to the fact any NEPA process involves substantial public input, said Rachel Orwan, the Wayne’s NEPA coordinator. The review is attempting to see if the regulations and analysis of effects the forest plan has in other areas can be applicable to fracking, even though fracking is not discussed “in detail” in the current plan, multiple forest officials said.

But regardless of what the review finds, many attendees are apparently not open to seeing fracking come to the forest and don’t trust the agencies that will be regulating it. “I don’t feel ODNR is doing us justice on this issue,” said Elisa Young, a concerned Athens County resident. “The fact they’re denying us having a public forum is an injustice in itself.” Young also expressed concern over what has been happening with fracking and injection wells in other states and is sad to see it “migrating” here.

Judy Smucker, another concerned Athens County resident, hopes that coming in mass to Wayne National Forest will put pressure on the forest to do an EIS specifically about fracking. “We want an EIS to be done,” Smucker said. “This is a national forest. It shouldn’t be used for profit.”

http://www.athensohiotoday.com/news/wayne-national-forest-holds-fracking-forum-amidst-protests/article_48044420-cba5-11e1-8dfb-001a4bcf887a.html#user-comment-area