

Wayne National Forest will not amend forest plan to address surface impacts of fracking

Fracking opponents: We won't be silenced

Athens Messenger

Monday, August 27, 2012 5:07 pm | *Updated: 10:15 am, Tue Aug 28, 2012.*

By **SARA BRUMFIELD** Messenger staff journalist

NELSONVILLE — The supervisor of Wayne National Forest announced today that despite urging from environmental activists, the forest will not amend its 2006 Land and Resource Management Plan in order to address the surface impacts of horizontal drilling for oil and gas development. The forest's Environmental Impact Statement prepared for the 2006 forest plan will also go unchanged.

Last December, 3,303 acres of Wayne land were scheduled for an oil and gas lease auction by the federal Bureau of Land Management. That acreage included 2,624 acres in Athens County, 528 acres in Perry County's Monroe Twp., and 151 acres in Gallia County's Harrison Twp.

The auction plans resulted in the formation of Right the Wayne, a campaign opposed to the leasing, which collected hundreds of petition signatures and more than a thousand protests letters in opposition to the leasing. The opposition resulted in Wayne National Forest Supervisor Anne Carey withdrawing the land from the auction and ordering that a study be done on the impacts of fracking.

The original consent for the leasing, given by the U.S. Forest Service in May 2011, was based on the Wayne's 2006 Forest Plan, which included an environmental impact statement that did not address fracking. Many residents have asked Wayne to conduct a new environmental impact statement to address the potential impacts that fracking may have on the forest.

On Monday, Carey issued a news release that says there is no need to correct or amend the 2006 Land and Resource Management Plan, nor supplement the environmental impact statement.

"I have reviewed the new information contained in the Supplemental Information Report, and determined that further environmental analysis is not needed," Carey wrote. "I believe that the existing Forest Plan direction is adequate to address the surface effects anticipated from the potential development of horizontal wells as protected by the Bureau of Land Management."

According to Wayne National Forest spokesman Gary Chancey, impacts to soil, air, water and wildlife were considered when reviewing the information.

"We live here too," Chancey said.

The release states, "The BLM has found that it is now economically feasible for deep well horizontal drilling using high volume hydraulic fracturing, a change from the previous projection, which said it wasn't economically feasible. The report also explains

that through 2016 that there is the potential for 13 high volume horizontal drilling well sites to be developed on the Wayne National Forest.”

Those 13 drill sites include three in the Athens District (Athens, Hocking, Perry and Vinton Counties) and 10 in the Marietta District (Washington, Monroe, Morgan and Noble Counties), according Chancey. However, Chancey said he didn’t know which counties those potential drill sites are specifically.

According to Chancey, “The Forest has also determined that high volume hydraulic fracturing does not present a seriously different picture of potential environmental effects than what is in the current Environmental Impact Statement for the revised Forest Plan.” He said the 2006 forest plan projected that a total of 234 vertical wells could initially disturb 272 surface acres on the Wayne National Forest over 10 years. However, Chancey said that to date, only 12 standard vertical wells have been developed since 2006 with a total of 20 acres of initial surface disturbance. He added that only 10 acres are currently disturbed after drilling was completed and wells were placed in production. That means that only 8 percent of BLM’s estimated vertical well development has occurred since 2006.

“Possible future horizontal drilling activities can be incorporated into the existing ‘Reasonably Foreseeable Development Scenario’ without increasing the projections for acres disturbed over the 10-year period,” Chancey said. “So there’s room to grow.” So what does this mean for the future of the mineral rights for Wayne National Forest? According to Chancey, the BLM can again request approval from the U.S. Forest Service for consent to include the mineral rights the forest owns (which is owned by the federal government) in a future auction. The BLM holds four auctions a year. Chancey did not know when the next BLM auction will be held.

If the BLM does request the Forest Service’s consent again, that request will go to the U.S. Forest Service regional forester in Milwaukee, who will then ask the opinion of the Wayne National Forest supervisor.

Chancey said BLM will receive public comments before any auctions, plus if a site-specific federal well drilling proposal is received, there will also be a 30-day public comment period by the U.S. Forest Service.

“The public wants to be a part of it and we’re excited they want to be a part of it,” Chancey said. “It means they care about natural resources.”

According to Chancey, the Wayne National Forest is 241,191 acres, of which 59 percent of the mineral rights are owned privately. He said the federal government only owns 41 percent of the mineral rights in Wayne National Forest. If mineral rights are sold, Chancey said the buyer has 10 years to develop a producing well or the mineral lease will revert back to the federal government. He added that although the mineral rights are currently owned by the federal government, any wells would still have to be permitted by the state.

“Oil and natural gas development is an important component of the nation’s energy portfolio, and has the potential to advance our nation’s energy security, improve air quality, and create jobs. The responsibility of the U.S. Forest Service is to safely and responsibly develop these resources in a way that ensures the well-being of surrounding communities and protects our landscapes and watersheds,” stated the news release from Wayne on Monday.

Roxanne Groff, one of the founders of the Right the Wayne group, said she was “extremely disappointed” with Carey’s decision on Monday.

“I feel her decision was in total disregard to public input given to her,” Groff said. “Dozens of educated, informed citizens met with her and provided her with reams of documentation.”

Groff said the decision shows that the public’s comments didn’t matter, adding that Carey doesn’t have any scientific proof that fracking is safe and that she “toed the company line.”

“It’s disturbing, but I don’t think it’s over yet,” she said.

On Monday afternoon, the Athens County Fracking Action Network issued a response to Carey’s decision, saying that they “won’t be silenced.”

“Ms. Carey’s decision ignores the overwhelming evidence painstakingly provided to her by the community over the past 11 months of the highly significant impacts of fracking when compared to impacts from vertical wells,” the group stated in the response. “Her decision shows total disregard not only for science and fact, but also for the community’s knowledge, concerns, and needs as expressed by dozens of official bodies and thousands of area residents, including the university’s president, mayors, health professionals, farmers, clergy, judges, educators, scholars, parents, business owners, and tourism officials. Thousands of people have signed petitions, hundreds have attended rallies, and dozens have had meetings with Ms. Carey to share their knowledge and concern.”

The group continued, “Fracking involves pressures of tens of thousands of pounds per square inch, chemical use of millions of pounds per well, water consumption of up to 10 million gallons per well totally lost to the hydrologic cycle, and waste production of millions of pounds of radioactive chemically laden water and solids per well. Pipeline construction, truck traffic, likelihood of serious chemical contamination from spills, and methane and CO2 emissions all are magnitudes greater than from vertical wells.”

sbrumfield@athensmessenger.com

Follow on Twitter @SaraBmessenger