

Fish & Boat Commission opts to lease land for gas drilling

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Pittsburgh--State officials are opening thousands of acres of public land around streams and lakes to Marcellus Shale natural gas drilling, partly to provide revenue for crucial repairs to dams. Water from state-owned lakes also will be sold to drilling companies for hydrofracturing, or fracking, a process that injects chemical-laced water to break up the shale and allow natural gas to escape.

"We've come to the conclusion that it would be irresponsible not to lease," said John Arway, executive director of the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission.

Arway told The Associated Press that a review of the 43,000 acres of land and water the commission owns led the agency to the conclusion that if it didn't sell leases to the gas that is thousands of feet underground, neighboring landowners would do so anyway.

A new source of revenue is crucial for the commission. Arway said, since it has a \$36 million projected shortfall just to repair 16 dams in serious condition. On top of that, 45,000 miles of streams in the state need to be surveyed.

Commissioner Robert Bachman said the water withdrawals and sales will be coming from state-owned lakes. "It's must less impact than if you're trying to take it out of a smaller flowing stream," Bachman said. Permanent or semipermanent pipes would deliver the water to gas-industry trucks, and if any of the commission-owned lakes got too low--during a drought, for example--the withdrawals could be halted.

“There’s less impact on our resources by leasing our properties where we have some control over what is going on,” Bachman said.

Arway and other commission members have previously acknowledged that they don’t have the staff or resources to keep up with the surge in drilling that’s taking place. More than 3,300 wells have been drilled across Pennsylvania in just the last few years. Environmental groups and the Environmental Protection Agency have expressed concerns about the process’s impact on water, soil and air quality. But the industry insists it is safe.

Some environmental experts and sportsmen’s groups question the need for the commission to rush ahead with leases.

“I think it would be much better if we were slowing this down. Why don’t we first make sure we’re doing it right?” said Bernard Goldstein, the interim director for the Center for Healthy Environments & Communities at the University of Pittsburgh.

Katy Dunlap of Trout Unlimited also voiced concerns.

“We understand that the Commission is in a bind right now, given that their only source of revenue is from fishing licenses and some federal funding. We just want to make sure that they are not sacrificing one of their goals to accomplish another,” said Dunlap, Eastern Water Project Director for Trout Unlimited, a nonprofit based in Arlington, VA.

Dunlap said the existing rules for public comment aren’t enough for the gas-drilling issue.

“It is imperative that the commission provide meaningful opportunities for public input, above and beyond the normal public comment opportunities afforded at Commission meetings,” she said. “And we won’t know what potential impacts there may be, unless we have an opportunity to review each lease and its conditions up-front.”

But Arway said the commission feels the existing rules give the public plenty of opportunity for input. He said the commission plans to have Web pages that show water withdrawal sites and lease sites, to ease public concern. Donegal Lake, a popular trout fishing area, might be the first commission property in southwestern Pennsylvania to be drilled for Marcellus Shale natural gas, but that will require another vote this fall.

About 14,000 acres of the commission's land and water holdings are potential drilling sites, a spokesman said.