

Public hearing generates fracking support, opposition

Noel Lyn Smith , nsmith@daily-times.com 9:03 a.m. MT May 9, 2017

Tribal and non-tribal members weigh in on fracking activities on the Navajo Nation



(Photo: Noel Lyn Smith/The Daily Times)

COUNSELOR — Four members of the Navajo Nation Council on Monday listened to a full spectrum of concerns about the effects of hydraulic fracturing on tribal lands, ranging from health and environmental risks to job creation and positive economic impact.

During the all-day hearing at the Counselor Chapter house, at least 50 tribal and non-tribal members talked about the benefits and disadvantages of using the energy technique.

The public hearing was scheduled after the Naa'bik'iyáti' Committee tabled a bill in March that requests the United Nations to conduct a field hearing on the Navajo Nation regarding the effect of hydraulic fracturing.

The tabled motion included a directive to schedule a public hearing within 60 days in one of the communities that has fracking activity.

Several comments centered on concerns about the health and environmental impacts of fracking, including the need for health assessments.

Because such assessments are lacking, the community started a project last year to compile data about health and safety.

Teresa Seamster is a member of the Counselor Health Assessment Committee, which is managing the project.

Seamster said the report would not be necessary if community members were not questioning air and water quality as well as livestock health.

"The problem is that gas and oil is right in our back yard," she said.

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Edward Wemytewa spoke about changes in the environment that are happening at Zuni Pueblo that he says are related to drilling. He shared his concerns during the public hearing on Monday at the Counselor Chapter house. (Photo: Noel Lyn Smith/The Daily Times)

So far the group has completed a health impact report summary, which Seamster gave to delegates, adding that they have enough funding to study water and air testing.

Among those supporting further energy development was Nageezi Chapter resident Delora Hesuse.

"I want to say that I am for oil and gas," Hesuse said adding it is a land owner's decision to approve drilling activities.

New Mexico Business Association Coalition member Larry Sonntag said revenue from the oil and gas industry goes beyond the local economy by supporting education and state programs.

"This revenue is crucial for many reasons," Sonntag said.

He also mentioned a recent study by the American Lung Association that labeled the county's air quality as clean, which was met with groans from some members of the audience.

Nageezi Chapter member Lauren Howland stood with her brother, Alex Howland, and disputed the study mentioned by Sonntag.

Lauren Howland said her 10-year-old sister has severe asthma she believes is a result of poor air quality in the region.

"She can't breathe without an inhaler. She can't breathe without the cost of prescription medication. Why is that if San Juan has the cleanest air?" she said.

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Teresa Seamster, a member of the Counselor Health Impact Assessment Committee, discusses a report on the impacts of hydraulic fracturing. (Photo: Noel Lyn Smith/The Daily Times)

Alex Howland reminded the audience that in 2015, a European study group found high methane levels over the Four Corners due to coal mining, natural gas extraction and fracking activities.

The economic impact also weighed on Clifton Horace with the Four Corners Economic Development.

Horace said 10 years ago the group recognized the region's dependence on energy development and need to change the area's source of revenue.

Despite the years that have passed, the transition remains "extremely difficult," he said.

If energy development was removed, the state would lose \$63 million from its budget and if the coal-fired power plants that operate in the county ceased production, the tribe would lose 60 percent in funding, he said.

"I encourage everyone here to take a deep breath and find some good compromises," Horace said.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates said comments collected at the public hearing will be included to the bill and it could go to the Naa'bik'íyáti' Committee on May 25.

Noel Lyn Smith covers the Navajo Nation for The Daily Times. She can be reached at 505-564-4636.

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