

DEC meeting on gas drilling draws large crowd

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Mar. 14

democratandchronicle.com

SPRINGWATER — One after another, environmental activists and conservationists trooped to a microphone at a public meeting here Thursday evening, all saying exactly the same thing.

Don't drill near Hemlock and Canadice lakes. Ever.

“The possibility — the possibility — of extracting mineral resources ... is an abomination and frankly an insult to the residents of this area who have cared for these lakes and their watershed for generations,” said Tawn Feeney, of Conesus, Livingston County.

The meeting was called by state environmental officials to solicit comment on the initial management plan for Hemlock-Canadice State Forest. About 300 people, half of them standing, packed the meeting at the fire hall in this Livingston County hamlet.

New York acquired 6,684 acres around pristine Hemlock and Canadice lakes in 2010 from the city of Rochester. Located in Livingston and Ontario counties about 25 miles south of Rochester, they're the only undeveloped Finger Lakes left and have been a source of drinking water for Rochester and other communities for more than 135 years.

Activists were enraged to learn when the draft management plan was released in mid-February that it did not rule out natural gas drilling on the property and, in fact, seemed to encourage it. Some said they felt it a betrayal of a promise by state officials to maintain the property in its primitive state.

Assurances by the Department of Environmental Conservation that any gas drilling in the state forest was highly unlikely have failed to calm the waters. Even an introductory comment Thursday evening by DEC forester Gretchen Cicora that the state has “no intention” of allowing drilling didn't help.

Speaker after speaker, about two dozen in all, denounced the idea and demanded an ironclad pledge that oil and gas drilling would never encroach on the lakes.

“While you've been very good about saying there will be no drilling in this area, we would like to see it in writing,” said James Bird, the president of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

He, like many other speakers, urged the lakes be given special status under the law.

“This land should not be treated as just a state forest. It should have the highest protection,” said William Ouweleen of Eagle Crest Vineyards, which sits on a hill overlooking Hemlock Lake.

Even before the management plan was released, the city of Rochester had been lobbying the state for additional protection from gas drilling in the watershed around the two lakes.

DEC officials say they included pro-drilling language in the draft management plan because they wanted to elicit a wide range of public comment. They have said it is unlikely any drilling would ever occur, and that the final management plan could include a flat-out ban.

State policy allows gas drilling in state forests. In 2006, New York auctioned off leases for gas drilling on 19,200 acres in several Southern Tier state forests. The auction brought in nearly \$9 million, a record for oil or gas leases of state land.

Proposed regulatory guidelines would prohibit the use of high-volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing in state forests and near public water supplies. That's the method of gas and oil extraction that the industry would prefer to use in most cases, but it's bitterly opposed by environmentalists in New York.

Activists say the guidelines wouldn't prevent encroachment by drilling infrastructure or the use of other drilling techniques near the two lakes. And in any event, the guidelines are not in effect and their future is uncertain.