

COUNTY OPEN TO FRACKING WASTE

Won't rule out treating wastewater

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By Steve Orr

Monroe County officials said Wednesday they would not rule out the possibility of treating wastewater from natural gas fracking at the county's sewage plants.

Democratic county legislators had complained earlier Wednesday they'd been trying to find out for months what the Brooks administration's policy was, and accused officials of stonewalling.

But county officials told a *Democrat and Chronicle* reporter last year that they would not follow the lead of some other municipalities in automatically refusing to even considering treating gas-drilling waste. They reiterated Wednesday afternoon that that remains their policy.

"We're not going to arbitrarily say yes or no," said county spokesman Justin Feasel. "We would work with the state and go from there."

Anything having to do with gas drilling is a hot-button issue in New York, where state officials are considering rules that would allow a wave of big new wells in the gas-rich Marcellus shale. Some welcome possible new drilling as an economic boon, while others say it could be an environmental disaster.

Opponents of expanded drilling have pressed local governments across the state to ban the practice and any related activity — including disposal of the chemically tainted or highly salty wastewater that results from the drilling method known as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

A number of municipalities, such as Onondaga County and the cities of Niagara Falls and Albany, have said they won't accept wastewater from the drilling industry. The city council in Auburn, Cayuga County, rescinded a ban on the use of its plant in March.

The current drilling controversy focuses on the proposed horizontal hydraulically fractured wells that would generate large quantities of wastewater. But there was little public outcry, or even public awareness, of the practices used for years to get rid of the lesser quantities of wastewater from the small, shallow wells that dot western and central New York.

That fluid traditionally was treated at municipal plants, spread on roads as de-icer or injected into a few deep disposal wells. At least seven municipalities, including

Canandaigua, Auburn and Buffalo, accepted the waste at their plants.

Most of the communities that did treat it, including Canandaigua, have halted acceptance of gas-drilling wastewater since controversy over fracking arose.

Monroe officials said last year they had never accepted the wastewater at their two treatment plants on Lake Ontario, but had had a few informal inquiries from drillers or waste-haulers.

When asked about Monroe's policy last year, then-spokesman Noah Lebowitz said it was "reasonable and rational" to study an application for treatment rather than reject it out of hand.

"The downsides of ruling out treating this type of waste would be significant. This would mean that enormous quantities of wastewater would be left untreated and, potentially, disposed of in ways that would result in great damage to the environment," he said.

The larger fraction of drilling wastewater, flowback, consists of water, sand and chemicals that have been used to fracture a well.

Operators also collect naturally occurring water from the well, usually called brine because it contains sodium chloride and other salts. Brine from New York's Marcellus shale also may contain uranium or other naturally occurring radioactive metals.

The extent to which municipal plants would be used to dispose of flowback or brine isn't clear. Industry officials have said they now reuse flowback water, and make more use of specially built private treatment facilities, not municipal ones.

Monroe County officials said if they were approached by a company looking to dispose of drilling wastewater, they would consider it like other industrial wastes and analyze whether their plant could cleanse the fluid properly without harming the environment or violating their existing discharge permit. Feasel also noted separate approval would be needed from state regulators.

Democratic legislators said Wednesday they asked for information on Monroe's policies five times this spring and also filed a Freedom of Information Law request, but learned nothing.

Spokesman Joe Rittler said Democratic lawmakers haven't taken a firm position yet on the propriety of using county treatment plants for drilling waste. "All the information we want is preliminary to any decision on whether it's a good idea or a bad idea," he said.

http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20120725/NEWS01/307250052/Fracking-wastewater-Monroe-County?nclink_check=1