

Cuomo: state to miss fracking deadline set for Thursday

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[Karen Dewitt](#)

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The state's environmental agency will know by Thursday whether it will miss a key deadline and delay approval of hydrofracking in New York once again. As Karen DeWitt reports, anti-fracking forces see an opportunity in the likely new delay, while those waiting to benefit economically from the gas drilling process are feeling frustrated.

Governor Andrew Cuomo says he expects the State's Department of Environmental Conservation will fail to meet a November 29th deadline to propose new rules for the gas drilling process known as hydro fracking.

"We are not going to be able to," Cuomo said. "The state wont finish the review by November 29th."

Speaking in Rochester, Cuomo says the environmental agency will have to apply for an extension , which could delay the process for up to another six months.

The Health and Environmental Departments have agreed that a health review needs to be finished before new fracking rules can be finalized. The State Health Commissioner, Dr. Nirav Shah, just a few days before Thanksgiving, contracted with three nationally known health experts to help him examine the material.

Groups who oppose fracking say they'll use the new delay as an opportunity to try to prevent the drilling from ever happening in New York . Walter Hang with Toxics Targeting, says his group will be writing letters to the three health experts to urge a thorough health review.

"I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that Dr. Shah and the three outside experts are fully aware of all of the pollution problems that have been reported in New York's oil and gas regions for decades and decades. We're going to call upon them to make sure that they address all of those concerns," Hang said.

Hang says there have been reports of past drinking water contamination, and failure to clean up past pollution from drilling. But he worries that the review will be narrowly focused, and not address opponents' concerns, and he says he's frustrated that the details of the review have not been made public.

"What are they supposed to do? That has never been disclosed," said Hang. "We don't know what the scope of their review is."

Pro fracking groups say they are fed up with all of the delays. Dan Fitzsimmons is President of the Joint Landowners Coalition, a group of 77,000 landowners who he says have been working to see that New Yorkers who sign leases with the gas companies get a fair deal. The coalition has written its own letter to Governor Cuomo, saying the latest obstacle is a "breach of faith" in government. He says Cuomo, who has maintained that "science" would determine whether fracking goes ahead in New York, is getting cold feet in the face of growing opposition.

"He seems to not be looking at the science anymore," said Fitzsimmons. "He's basing his decisions and a lot of what he's doing on emotions."

Fitzsimmons says health effects of fracking have already been studied extensively, and numerous other states and nations have fracked successfully for years. He says he and his neighbors have only to look across the southern border into Pennsylvania, to see the economic benefits that gas drilling can bring.

"It's so frustrating," said Fitzsimmons, who says he sees "thriving" businesses in Pennsylvania, and farmers repairing their homes, and barns and buying new tractors.

"It's incredible to see the benefits that this has brought," said Fitzsimmons. "But yet, that border that's sitting here, that invisible line, we can't take advantage of that."

Despite Governor Cuomo's comments that the fracking deadline would be missed, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Environmental Conservation would not confirm that the November 29th deadline will not be met, but says there will be more details made public before Thursday.