

Supervisors Will Not Vote On Bergton Well Today

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HARRISONBURG - The Rockingham County Board of Supervisors will not vote on a request for a natural gas well in Bergton at its meeting today, according to the supervisor who would initiate action on the proposal.

Information distributed among opponents of the proposal over the last few days indicated the board would approve a special-use permit application by Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC to drill for natural gas.

But Board Chairman Pablo Cuevas, whose district encompasses the proposed well site, said Tuesday that the measure would not come off the table at tonight's regular board meeting.

"There will be no action at [tonight's] meeting," he said. "Action will come when the staff has all the information in the proposal in order for the board to consider."

The board tabled Carrizo's request at its Feb. 24 meeting following a public hearing in which a dozen people, including conservationists and residents, raised concerns about potential environmental impacts of the proposal.

Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC, a subsidiary of Houston-based Carrizo Oil & Gas Inc., applied for the permit to explore and possibly produce natural gas in the Marcellus Shale field, a sedimentary formation that underlies much of West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. A small portion of the field underlies northwestern Virginia.

Cuevas said he met Tuesday with representatives of Carrizo, environmentalists and experts regarding the application. He said he would update supervisors at today's meeting about where the proposal stands, but it hasn't been determined when it would come off the table for a vote.

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Hardy Eyed For Natural Gas Production In W.Va. Hoped For This Year

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By [Jeremy Hunt](#)

HARRISONBURG - The Houston energy company seeking to drill for natural gas in northwestern Rockingham County has already begun work on a similar project just over the West Virginia state line.

Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC, a subsidiary of Carrizo Oil & Gas Inc., recently finished drilling a well in Hardy County, W.Va., and it hopes to begin production of natural gas using a process called "hydrofracking" this year.

Chip Johnson, president and chief executive of Carrizo Oil & Gas, said well tests looked promising, but the company won't know if the site will be profitable until production begins.

"You can never tell what you've found until you hydrofrack. So far, the geology looked good on that," Johnson said.

Carrizo hopes to extract natural gas from the Marcellus Shale field, a sedimentary formation the size of Greece that underlies much of Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York and West Virginia. A small portion of the shale field underlies northwest Virginia.

In recent years, energy companies have been tapping into the shale field using horizontal drilling and hydrofracking. Hydrofracking, or hydraulic fracturing, is a process that uses a high-pressured mixture of water and chemicals to break rock apart and release trapped gas.

The Rockingham County Board of Supervisors tabled a request last month by Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC for a special-use permit to drill an exploratory well near Bergton. The board said it needed more information before voting on the application.

County officials are still gathering information about the proposal, and a decision could be made as early as the board's March 24 meeting.

A half-dozen people - including conservationists and a retired environmental engineer - raised concerns at the board's meeting on Feb. 24 about the project's potential effect on water quality.

One of them was Bruce Ritchie, a Criders resident who has since organized an informational meeting about drilling in the Marcellus Shale field and how it has impacted other communities. The meeting will be held Thursday at 6:30 p.m. at the Bergton Community Center.

Ritchie says drilling in the Marcellus Shale field has been damaging to other communities, and property owners often aren't aware of the implications of leasing their land to energy companies.

"We felt like this is our time to try to get the people in this community to look at actual experience of people in other locations where gas has been drilled for," he said. "We're just trying to get people to look at the real world situation."

If Rockingham County gives Carrizo the green light for the Bergton well and the company can produce enough gas, many more such operations are likely to spring up.

Johnson says his company has lease agreements on 30,000 acres along the Virginia-West Virginia border in the northwest Valley.

Issues surrounding Marcellus wells have cropped up as production has grown exponentially in the last two years as more and more energy companies look to tap into the shale deposit. Potential environmental impacts are often the largest concern, but problems with noise and air quality also have been raised as more wells go online.

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'Shale' Of The Century? 'Big Money' At Stake With Proposed Gas Well

By [Jeremy Hunt](#)

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HARRISONBURG - If a proposed natural gas well in Rockingham County becomes reality, it would be the first of its kind in Virginia.

And if the Houston energy company that wants to explore gas in the Marcellus Shale field can turn a profit, similar wells are sure to spring up throughout the Shenandoah Valley.

Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC, a subsidiary of Carrizo Oil & Gas Inc., has filed a special-use permit application with Rockingham County to drill an exploratory well in Bergton.

The county Board of Supervisors tabled the request last week following a public comment period in which a half-dozen people raised concerns about the environmental impact of such an operation.

Supervisors and county staff had similar questions and concerns that the board plans to clarify and answer before putting the request to a vote.

The Marcellus Shale gas field is a sedimentary rock formation that underlies much of New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. A small portion of it lies under western portions of the Old Dominion.

"There are some small fingers of that shale formation that come into the northwestern part of Virginia," said Mike Abbott, public relations manager for the state Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy.

'It's Big Money'

Natural gas is often found trapped inside shale. A process called hydrofracking is used to break up the rock and release the gas.

Geologists have known about natural gas in Marcellus for decades, and energy companies have performed exploratory drilling in Bergton before, most recently in the 1970s.

Data from those explorations is what led Carrizo to Bergton, according to David Schnitz, a consultant with the company.

Despite having been aware of the gas potential, energy companies have only recently begun to tap into the resource because of several factors.

For one, the estimated amount of gas in the formation has swelled in the last couple of years. In 2008, geologists estimated that Marcellus contained more than 500 million cubic feet of gas, more than 250 times what was thought to be there in 2003.

Scientists postulate that 10 percent of the gas - worth about \$1 trillion - can be extracted. That amount, about 50 million cubic feet, is enough energy to supply the entire United States for two years.

Rising energy prices and technological advances also helped spark the Marcellus Shale boom.

"It's big money," says Karen Burns, a Rockingham County resident who owns property in Pennsylvania that she is considering leasing to an energy company.

Production On The Rise

Pennsylvania is the hub of Marcellus drilling activity. Exploratory activity in Pennsylvania began in 2004, said Bryan Swistock, water resources extension specialist at Penn State.

Since then, and mostly in the last two years, dozens of Marcellus wells have sprung up as companies try to

cash in on the reserves, Swistock said.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, there were nearly 100 active Marcellus Shale operators in the Keystone State.

"It's only going to increase, and it's been increasing significantly," Swistock said.

The potential for big money has generated interest in Marcellus beyond the U.S. In the last couple of months, foreign companies announced plans to invest billions of dollars in Marcellus assets and production.

Regulation Seen As Key

As could be expected, natural gas production from Marcellus Shale has unique issues and risks.

Water quality is a major concern in Pennsylvania, including contamination by some of the chemicals involved in hydrofracking.

Burns, who has been researching Marcellus as she weighs what to do with her land, claims that some energy companies have engaged in dishonest practices in Pennsylvania to acquire mineral rights, particularly with elderly landowners.

"It can be big money, and also it can attract less than good neighbors," she said.

If Marcellus production takes off in Virginia, Swistock said, proper regulations and enforcement will be crucial.

Abbott expressed confidence in Virginia's existing regulations and said the mines, minerals and energy department will be keeping a close eye on Carrizo's operations, provided his agency and the Rockingham board approve the company's permits.

The department has been regulating oil and natural gas production, mostly in southwest Virginia, for decades, he added.

"The only difference about this is there would be drilling in a formation that's never been drilled before," he said. "Every formation can present its own issues or problems or benefits. It has to be weighed in that manner."

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Drilling Proposal Hits Wall

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Rockingham Wants More Answers About Gas Well

By [Jeremy Hunt](#)

HARRISONBURG - A Houston energy company looking to drill for natural gas in Rockingham County has a lot to answer for if it wants the project to move forward.

A half-dozen people - including conservationists and a retired environmental engineer - raised concerns about potential environmental impacts of the proposal at a public hearing during Wednesday's Board of

Supervisors meeting.

Following the hearing, the board tabled a special-use permit application by Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC to perform exploratory drilling in Bergton.

Board Chairman Pablo Cuevas said he would arrange a "get-together" with experts in the field, county staff and conservationists to gather as much information as possible before a decision is made.

Cuevas said Thursday that no meeting had been set to discuss the project.

"I think it's a good thing, but I think it needs to be looked at and the merits of it need to be checked out," said Cuevas, whose district includes the proposed well site. "If it's not [good for Rockingham County], we have to pass it up and move on."

Carrizo wants to drill for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale gas field, a sedimentary formation that underlies much of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia.

A small portion of the Marcellus Shale is underneath northwestern Virginia.

Carrizo would use a technique called hydrofracking to break up the shale and release natural gas trapped inside. Hydrofracking involves high water pressure and a mixture of chemicals to break the rock apart.

If the request is approved and the company determines there is enough gas to warrant a permanent operation, a new permit would not be required, according to the application.

The project would be regulated by the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy.

In addition to speakers at Wednesday's hearing, the board and county staff also had questions regarding the proposal. Staff's biggest concern was the proposed well's location in the 100-year flood plain.

A company representative said Carrizo takes measures to prevent any environmental impact.

Board members questioned what the company's liability would be if a neighboring water source became contaminated by the well.

David Schnitz, a consultant with Carrizo, said the odds of that happening are "1 in 200,000."

"A lot of things would have to happen," he said.

David Asbury, director of the department of mines' gas and oil division, said that in such an instance, Carrizo would have to restore water quality to what it had been before contamination.

Malcolm Cameron, a retired environmental engineer with the Virginia Department of Transportation, pointed out that the special-use permit application does not disclose what types of chemicals would be used in the hydrofracking process.

"There's a lot of red flags I see," Cameron said, echoing a concern that board members and staff had.

Schnitz said the chemical composition varies from well to well, depending on what drillers run into.

"I can't tell you right now," he said.

Jeff Kelble, a "riverkeeper" for the environmental advocacy group Waterkeeper Alliance, wondered whether wastewater would be treated at local wastewater treatment facilities and if the plants could handle the

chemicals.

"The potential impact from this exploration and drilling are long lasting," said Kelble, who advocates for clean water in the Shenandoah River watershed.

Other concerns of the board and residents include the proposed site's proximity to two streams; where water for drilling would come from; and emergency protocols should there be a fire or explosion at the site.

It's unclear when the board will take up the permit application for further discussion.

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