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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approves study of effects of hydraulic fracturing on the Navajo Nation

WINDOW ROCK – The Health, Education, and Human Services Committee considered Legislation No. 0226-16 on Monday, which requests a scientific study to be conducted on the environmental impacts of hydraulic fracturing, also known as “fracking,” before the Navajo Nation government considers establishing any policy regarding the resource extraction method.

According to the legislation, in 2013 the Navajo Nation Council approved Resolution No. CO-50-13 to adopt the Navajo Energy Policy, which states “the Navajo Nation will continue to develop its traditional fossil fuels, including oil and gas, in concert with renewable technologies, and will use new technologies to maximize the value of the Nation’s natural resources while minimizing environmental impacts caused by their development.”

The policy also states, “Communities impacted by energy development should be educated about energy development and related issues, and have an opportunity to provide input on energy development projects impacting such communities.”

Legislation sponsor Council Delegate Davis Filfred (Mexican Water, Aneth, Tecnospos, Tóíkan, Red Mesa) said there were many concerns regarding proposed hydraulic fracturing on the Navajo Nation and the Naabik’íyáti’ Committee held two work sessions to educate members on the natural resource extraction method.

“There are Navajo citizens who do not have information regarding hydraulic fracturing and they are afraid it will affect the land and ground water, so we have decided to ensure we follow the guidelines in the 2013 Energy Policy and provide that information to the public when it is complete,” said Delegate Filfred.

Delegate Filfred added that studies from Yale University, Colorado State University, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have drafted assessments on hydraulic fracturing and found no significant negative environmental impacts. The studies by the entities are currently undergoing peer review.

HEHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels), who sponsored legislation to oppose hydraulic fracturing, said he looks forward to the outcome of the studies

because it would allow Council members to see a fair perspective of the implications that can occur as a result of hydraulic fracturing.

“The legislation has good intentions to request its own study pertaining to fracking, and maybe we will have a more definitive position of our geological map to identify the depths of the aquifers, and where the gas and oil is located, as well as what the possibility could be pertaining to any contamination that may happen,” said Delegate Hale.

Delegate Hale said that the study should include the negative effects of a potential hydraulic fracturing disaster, such as water, air, and land. He said it would aid in developing policies to ensure accountability of all entities involved with hydraulic fracturing on Navajo land.

He added that the many hydraulic fracturing companies are non-Navajo owned and if an emergency took place, it would not affect their health and well being compared to the large Navajo population that would have to deal with the fallout and potential health effects, and he said that those type of realities should be reflected in the study for fair consideration.

EHSC members vote 2-0 to approve the legislation and will move forward to the Resources and Development Committee for consideration. The Naabik'íyáti' Committee serves as the final authority on the bill.

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