State imports advice on fracking

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Former Colorado governor advises North Carolina panel

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RALEIGH North Carolina's fracking commissioners picked up some pointers on public safety and public relations from a former governor of Colorado who five years ago oversaw that state's overhaul of its fracking rules.

Bill Ritter, a one-term Democrat who now leads Colorado State University's Center for the New Energy Economy, shepherded a process that resulted in what some consider some of the strictest natural gas mining regulations in the country. His appearance Wednesday before the N.C. Mining & Energy Commission was also noteworthy because Ritter's name emerged this week on a shortlist of potential candidates to head the U.S. Department of Energy.

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Ritter urged the commission to build public trust, saying public acceptance will be necessary to give energy developers "the social license to operate" in local communities. But Ritter didn't duck the hard reality that fracking – an industry term for extracting natural gas from shale rock formations – remains divisive in his state, where several cities have adopted fracking bans.

"There was a lot of tension, lots of controversy," Ritter said of Colorado's debate over fracking standards. "We filled hearing rooms everywhere we went."

The N.C. Mining & Energy Commission is several months into what's expected to be a two-year project of conducting research and writing safety standards to govern

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the hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling of natural gas in this state.

Commissioners said Ritter's presentation, which lasted nearly an hour, was immensely helpful. However, Ritter said little that hasn't been revealed in studies, reports and news accounts, and deferred to other experts on technical questions.

"You've given us some very useful pointers," Commissioner Vikram Rao told Ritter. "This was a great meeting. It's our first substantive meeting, and actually not boring."

Fracking opponents say shale gas extraction is a high-risk industrial activity that will lead to chemical spills, well blowouts and drinking water contamination, among other problems.

Ritter also noted that Colorado's stringent safety standards haven't immunized the state from chemical accidents.

"There have been a number of spills," he said. "However strict your regulations are, they're only as good as your enforcement."

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>
> **BILL RITTER**
>
> FORMER GOVERNOR OF COLORADO

The Denver Post reported this month that Colorado has experienced more than 2,000 fracking-related spills in the past five years, and that 17 percent of them resulted in groundwater contamination. In one county, 40 percent of spills reached groundwater. Some of the spills contained cancer-causing benzene, the newspaper reported.

Colorado has nearly 50,000 active wells, up 31 percent since 2008, the Denver Post reported.

Colorado this year won plaudits from fracking foes for requiring drillers to disclose the chemicals and their concentrations used in the fracking process. A horizontally drilled well can require as much as 5 million gallons of water mixed with sand and chemicals to fracture shale rock under high pressure and release natural gas and other fuels trapped inside for millions of years.

Colorado's fracking board, known as the Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, is considering a proposal that would require drillers to test groundwater before and after drilling to provide baseline data that could be used to determine whether fracking harms well water.

The N.C. Mining & Energy Commission is also considering such a requirement. Duke University hydrologists have proceeded with conducting such tests in Lee County. North Carolina is believed to have a small natural gas reserve concentrated around Lee, Chatham and Moore counties that could be used in local manufacturing or in power plants.

"There is no doubt that drilling for oil and gas are pretty significant industrial processes," Ritter said. "It is a 24/7 process."

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