

Testimony on SB 108, Oil & Gas Leasing
Before the Senate Agriculture, Environment & Natural Resources Committee
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on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Ohio

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Last year at our national convention, the League of Women Voters unanimously resolved to call for 'stronger regulation and enforcement of rules about mining for energy resources'. The resolution was proposed by the local League from Tomkins County, NY, a largely rural area, heavily dependent on well water. They were concerned with the possibility of gas drilling nearby and by reports of well pollution in Pennsylvania, believed to be associated with the drilling. Several studies are underway to establish whether this pollution is actually caused by drilling.

Believing that it is prudent to wait until these studies are available, the League of Women Voters of Ohio has called for a one-year moratorium on new well permits. Such moratoriums are now in effect in Arkansas and in New York State and under consideration in several other states. It is unfortunate that there are environmental questions about new methods of natural gas extraction. It is a potent weapon in the fight against climate change, particularly when it is used to replace coal in electric power generation.

The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico shows that our resolution is both timely and important. And the lessons from that multi-billion dollar oil spill can be applied to our thinking about drilling in Ohio for oil and gas. After all, both technologies involve going deep into the surface of the Earth to extract fossil fuel.

Until last summer, both off-shore oil drilling and land-based gas drilling had been carried out for many years relatively safely. Safe operation brings complacency and relaxation of regulatory oversight, which became a factor in the Gulf oil spill. This relaxation may also have contributed to the many cases of environmental damage resulting from gas drilling in Pennsylvania. It has been claimed that Ohio will not duplicate Pennsylvania's experience because our regulation is stricter. This claim is hard to document and is irrelevant, because adoption of Governor Kasich's budget will lead to a steep decrease in the number of examiners. Weaker oversight means greater potential for disaster.

There is one final lesson from the oil spill. As time went on, drilling extended further out from shore and into ever deeper waters. Finally, BP went 'one bridge too far' and a huge oil spill resulted.

Like Gulf oil, gas drilling is going to greater depths to exploit shale deposits, which are believed to be extremely rich. And they are doing so by using a relatively new variation on the standard method, called horizontal drilling or deep shale horizontal fracking, depending on which side you are on. It is this combination of factors that makes a pause reasonable. A reasonable resolution of the pause would include:

Formulation by an independent agency of the precautions necessary for safe drilling.
Adoption of these precautions by the industry.
Strict State supervision that these precautions are being carried out.

Because there is no shortage of natural gas, there is no urgent need to increase drilling now.

And that takes us to SB108. Up to this point I have been discussing all of Ohio, but SB108 only covers public lands. This limitation brings other factors into play.

There is the question of how much gas and oil lies under Ohio parks. Estimates by ODNR for the entire state use numbers in the trillions for cubic feet of gas and in the millions for barrels of oil. But the U.S. uses huge quantities of these substances and Ohio's untapped resources will provide less than a year's supply of either fuel. And since state lands, including parks, are about two percent of the state. SB108 will open only a small fraction of a small reserve – hardly the game changer cited in previous testimony.

Even if there were a significant amount of gas on state land, we question how the State can propose to open up public lands to drilling before it has determined that the drilling practices do not encompass long-term risks for the environment.

Perhaps, most important of all is the moral issue. These lands were set aside to be free of commercial exploitation. What right have we to break faith with previous generations?

First, we ask for a moratorium on drilling until the environmental questions have been addressed and resolved. Second, we ask that you recognize that drilling on state lands involves not only environmental risks but the desecration of our parks for a relatively insignificant commercial gain. We urge you to vote against SB 108.

Thank you for your attention. I will be happy to answer your questions.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.