

Ohio OKs accepting bids for fracking under state park, wildlife areas

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Ohio will allow companies to bid for oil and gas drilling under a state park and two wildlife areas, a decision made as opponents vocally protested throughout the meeting.

Ohio's Oil and Gas Land Management Commission voted Wednesday to greenlight accepting bids for fracking under Salt Fork State Park in Guernsey County, Valley Run Wildlife Area in Carroll County and Zepernick Wildlife Area in Columbiana County. Bids will be accepted starting in January.

The committee denied a request for Wolf Run State Park in Noble County, in part because of concerns about land used by Ohio State University. The university's Eastern Agricultural Research Station uses the land to conduct research into cattle reproduction, sheep management and other studies.

After the five-member commission unanimously approved accepting bids for land under Salt Fork State Park, opponents started yelling: "Public land is not for profit." They forced the commission to take a 15-minute recess as Chair Ryan Richardson asked them to stop. No public comment was permitted at Wednesday's hearing, prompting one person to yell: "You're allowed to give away our state and we can't say anything."

Hydraulic fracturing, also known as fracking, is a process that uses pressurized water, sand and chemical additives to extract oil and gas reserves from mineral supplies under the Earth's surface.

Ohio legalized leasing its public lands for oil and gas exploration in 2011, but the law stalled until Republicans in the state legislature rewrote it in December 2022. Legislators said they wanted to kickstart a law that had been on the books for more than a decade.

Ohio Oil and Gas Association President Rob Brundrett said he was "pleased to see the commission continue to advance nominated parcels to the bidding process laid out by the statute."

Opponents of fracking under parks say it's bad for the environment, emitting greenhouse gases like methane and threatening Ohio's protected parks. Gov. Mike DeWine has said he won't approve surface drilling, but some worry the governor's promise alone won't protect Ohio's natural wonders.

"Fracking our parks is not a wise use of natural resources," said Cathy Cowan Becker with Save Ohio Parks. "It's about locking Ohio into a dying fossil fuel industry allowing out-of-state oil and gas companies to make a profit."

The commission did add some language requested by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources to address water sources, reduce light pollution and limit fracking during hunting season.

Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost is still investigating fake pro-fracking letters sent to the commission after a [Cleveland.com investigation](#). The probe is ongoing, a spokeswoman said Wednesday.