

University of Tennessee Wins Approval for Hydraulic Fracturing Plan

By **HOLLIE DEESE**
and **ROBBIE BROWN**

NASHVILLE — The University of Tennessee faced protests here on Friday over its proposal to let a private company drill for natural gas across a forest controlled by the university.

Environmentalists say opening the Cumberland Forest in eastern Tennessee to hydraulic fracturing, a process known as "fracking," could harm wildlife and scenery on the 8,000-acre tract of state-owned land.

But the university says it would create a rare, controlled environment in which experts could study the environmental impact of the controversial drilling technique, while also generating revenue to finance research.

The State Building Commission voted unanimously on Friday to approve the proposal to open the site up for bidding. Once a company is selected, the commission would need to approve the terms of the contract.

Hollie Deese reported from Nashville, and Robbie Brown from Atlanta.

Mark Emkes, the head of the state's Department of Finance and Administration, said he was sensitive to environmental concerns but supported the university's position. "There is a lot of demand for this supply." The forest has been overseen by the university's agriculture department since 1947 and, after decades of strip mining and clean-cutting trees by private companies, has been restored to a biologically diverse condition. The university has been considering leasing out the land since 2001.

The benefits would be financial and academic, said William F. Brown, the dean of research and director of the university's Agricultural Experiment Station. A private company would lease the mineral rights on a portion of the land and university officials would study the impact of drilling on water and air quality, wildlife and geology and recommend plans for curbing future damage.

The gas company would have no control over the research and the university would ensure that safe drilling methods were used, Dr. Brown said. "We're just try-



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Protesters in Nashville, where a state panel Friday voted to allow the University of Tennessee to lease land to a gas company.

ing to conduct unbiased, scientifically sound research," he added. "We're hearing more questions about the environmental impact of natural gas extraction. We feel like we have an obligation to be able to answer those questions."

But the Southern Environmental Law Center has called the

plan "deeply flawed." Gwen Parker, a staff lawyer for the group, said the university was putting finances above health and environmental concerns. The plan creates obvious conflicts of interest, she said, as the research will be financed by the gas companies being studied.

Hydraulic fracturing involves injecting huge amounts of water, mixed with sand and chemicals, at high pressures to break up shale formations and release the gas. Environmentalists worry the process could release harmful chemicals that would contaminate drinking water.

The financial value of the region's gas is not known, Dr. Brown said. But the university has proposed leasing the land for an initial fee of \$300,000, plus \$300,000 per year and 15 percent royalties on any gas sold.

On Friday, several dozen environmentalists marched outside the commission meeting in Nashville. Inside more than 100 people heard 24 speakers argue for or against the university's plan.

Kathleen Williams, the executive director of the Tennessee Parks and Greenways Foundation, said the forest was one of the most biologically rich and diverse in the country. "Because we have so much to protect we need to take extra care," she said. "Our motto should be to do no permanent damage while technology keeps up."