

Union group urges hiring of local Marcellus workers

By Paul J. Nyden

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A coalition of West Virginia unions launched a campaign Friday to pressure companies in the Marcellus Shale natural gas industry to hire local workers for their projects, especially in the state's northern counties.

Hiring local workers makes good economic sense, according to the West Virginia State Building Trades group, which includes unions representing electricians, carpenters, boilermakers, pipe fitters, painters, ironworkers, roofers and other workers.

"There are many important [Marcellus] issues. But our mission is to focus on jobs," said Steve White, president of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation. "Too many local workers who are qualified and who want to work for the Marcellus Shale people going out of state.

"If you take a trip to northern West Virginia of the state and look at license plates in hotel and motel parking lots, you will know exactly what we are taking about. Out-of-state folks are coming in while our unemployment rates remain high."

Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana, White said, are the primary sources of out-of-state workers.

"That is where the most recent boom was, so gas companies are bringing in the same people who worked down there," White said. "There is a misperception that we don't have the people to do this work. That is wrong."

Dave Efaw, who heads the West Virginia State Building Trades, said his organization is using petition drives, county commission resolutions and yard signs to get local workers hired. The ACT Foundation has also set up a website: www.jobsforlocalworkers.com.

"Marcellus Shale is vast and valuable, but West Virginia can only benefit if local residents are hired for the jobs the boom is creating," Efaw said in a news release Friday.

Tom Gray, president of the Upper Ohio Valley Building Trades Council, said his groups are urging "companies to use workers and contractors from the area to fill industry jobs. Marcellus can be good for us, but only if local workers get the jobs."

More than 20,000 construction workers live in the mid- and upper Ohio Valley today.

Wetzel County, with major Marcellus Shale resources, had 11.9 percent unemployment in September, the highest rate of any of the state's 55 counties.

Nearby Ohio and Marshall counties also lost jobs from August to September.

"Meanwhile, campgrounds are sprouting up to house out-of-state workers brought in by companies working in the Marcellus Shale," Efaw said.

Keith Hughes, business manager of Iron Workers Local 549 in Wheeling, said, "Our greatest resource is found above the ground. It's our talented and hardworking men and women. They've built our bridges, hospitals, schools and offices."

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