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## Colorado's fracking wars are far from settled

The state's anti-fracking activists were at their blustering best after the announcement Monday of a deal to pull oil and gas initiatives from the ballot, claiming the "closed door negotiation" failed to protect "health, safety and property from the harms of fracking" — to quote a breathless press release from Food & Water Watch.

"We are outraged," chimed in Russell Mendell of Frack Free Colorado.

They should be outraged. If the task force that Gov. John Hickenlooper and Rep. Jared Polis agreed to create actually comes up with legislative recommendations that are enacted into law, the fractivists' cherished goal of sabotaging the oil and gas industry may be doomed. Come 2016 and their next chance to go to the statewide ballot, they would find themselves isolated as never before.

But of course that outcome is not foreordained. If the task force fails to reach consensus and lawmakers refuse to strengthen local control of drilling, the fractivists' clout may well grow by 2016.

And the political climate of a presidential election year could favor them as well.

Still, Hickenlooper, whose persistence pushed the deal through, has bought more time for those on both sides of the divide over local control of drilling who desire a genuine compromise. His Republican opponent, Bob Beauprez, may think that any "grand bargain compromise" amounts to weak-kneed capitulation, even if acceptable to oil and gas companies, but Initiatives 88 and 89 were real threats to the state's economy. They may have been defeated — and probably would have been — but who knows? Now they're off the table.

And what of Polis? The banker and stage manager for Amendments 88 and 89 remains the wild card in the fracking wars, at times sounding like a fractivist himself and at times dismissing those on the fringe. At one point last year, he even told me that those who want to ban fracking are like groups seeking to outlaw fluoride in water.

At the press conference Monday, Polis was in his centrist mode. He praised the deal as "truly a victory for the people of Colorado" and mentioned no fewer than five times that the task force would put average citizens concerned about drilling (or fracking, as he insisted on saying) on equal footing with the oil and gas industry. Meanwhile, he said, the deal would lay the groundwork for "providing greater stability for the oil and gas industry."

Polis also said, somewhat surprisingly, that his 2011 visit with Erie residents upset about drilling rigs — or "fracking rigs," as he would have it — in the vicinity of a school "was my introduction to this issue."

It depends on what the meaning of "this issue" is.

After all, Polis had been raising an alarm about fracking long before that visit. As early as 2009, he was trumpeting the idea that fracking was contaminating the nation's water supply, and referenced a "drumbeat" of "personal tragedies."

"Families, communities, and local governments are upset that the safety of their water has been compromised by a special interest exemption ...," the congressman said. "It is irresponsible to stand by while innocent people are getting sick because of an industry exemption that Dick Cheney snuck in to our nation's energy policy."

Polis later would tout an appearance with "Gasland" director Josh Fox, who wants to ban drilling and who, along with other radical opponents of fossil fuels, presumably now feels betrayed.

I asked Polis this week whether he would support a recommendation of the task force, assuming it issues one, and he indicated it was too early to say.

No, the fracking wars aren't yet settled in Colorado — not by a long shot.

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