

Effort to Avoid Vote on Fracking Falters in Colorado

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JULY 16, 2014



Gov. John W. Hickenlooper of Colorado was unable to strike a deal to ward off an election-year fight on oil and gas drilling.

Credit David Zalubowski/Associated Press

Efforts by leading Colorado Democrats to head off a costly and divisive election-year fight over [oil](#) and gas drilling appeared to crumble on Wednesday as Gov. John W. Hickenlooper announced that he did not have enough support to pass a compromise law giving local towns more control over fracking in their backyards.

“Despite our best efforts and those of other willing partners, we have not been able to secure the broader stakeholder support necessary to pass bipartisan legislation in a special session,” Mr. Hickenlooper, a Democrat, said in a [statement](#).

The announcement left energy developers and environmental groups girding for battle over two measures proposed for the November ballot that would outlaw drilling within 2,000 feet of

homes and schools and give communities more power to restrict drilling with environmental laws. Supporters call the measures sensible responses to the drilling rigs rising like beanstalks across much of Northern Colorado. Opponents say they will spawn legal challenges and could cripple an industry that employs thousands of Coloradans and fills state and local coffers.

Both sides say the stakes are high. These would be some of the first statewide votes on whether to rein in oil and gas drilling, and the results could ripple through other states trying to balance energy development against concerns about air and water quality.

In Colorado, the prospect of a fight over fracking has put many Democrats on edge. They fear the measures could hurt them in critical races for governor and the Senate in November, drawing in millions of dollars in outside political spending and transforming November's midterm elections into proxy battles pitting energy development against the environment.

Mr. Hickenlooper is running for re-election against a former Republican congressman, [Bob Beauprez](#), and the race has tightened to a virtual tie amid growing voter disapproval with the governor's job performance, according to [a poll](#) released Wednesday by Quinnipiac University. Senator Mark Udall, a Democrat, is trying to hold on to a Senate seat in the face of a well-financed challenge from Representative Cory Gardner, a Republican.

Shortly after the compromise died, Mr. Udall came out against what he called the "one size fits all" ballot measures. He said they failed to hit the right balance between energy development and protecting Colorado's air, water and communities at the heart of the drilling boom.

For weeks, Mr. Hickenlooper and other leading Democrats have tried to broker a deal supported by energy companies, business groups and Representative Jared Polis, a wealthy Democrat from Boulder who is a leading backer in the campaign to put drilling restrictions on the ballot. If Mr. Hickenlooper had been able to get a deal through the legislature, which is narrowly controlled by Democrats, Mr. Polis would have withdrawn his support for the ballot measures.

A compromise to allow towns to pass stricter health and safety rules related to drilling won support from Mr. Polis, two major oil and gas companies and an assortment of environmental and business groups. But that was not enough to convince Republicans in the state legislature or a handful of reluctant Democrats. On Wednesday, Mr. Polis said the deal had been thwarted by "personal attacks and scare tactics."

"Now, as it has become clear that the path to passing a legislative compromise has been obstructed, we must turn to the people of Colorado to solve this problem," he said.

Supporters of the two initiatives say they have gathered at least 42,000 signatures of the 86,105 needed to put the measures onto November's ballot. Nick Passanante, the campaign director for Safe. Clean. Colorado., which is leading the efforts, said he looked forward to the campaign.

"It's about protecting Colorado families and building some responsible boundaries between energy development and families," he said. "We've been moving full speed ahead."