

EPA extends public comment period on Pavillion fracking report

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Bowing to requests from state and industry officials, the Environmental Protection Agency will allow more time for public comments on a controversial report that links hydraulic fracturing to Wyoming groundwater contamination and will hold a public peer review meeting in the state.

The EPA will accept public comments on its draft report on its investigation into tainted water at Pavillion until March 12 — a 45-day extension — EPA spokesman Rich Mylott said.

“The public comment process is vital as we move towards a full review of the report and comments by independent scientists this spring,” he said. “EPA has been and will remain committed to transparency and public involvement as we move forward.”

Encana Corp., the operator in the Pavillion field, had called for the agency to hold off on closing its public comment period before it released additional information.

“We’re pleased that EPA has chosen to extend the comment period,” Encana spokesman Doug Hock said. “This will allow time for them to provide the additional data we have requested and allow us the opportunity to provide more thorough and detailed comments on the draft report.”

In a letter sent to Gov. Matt Mead on Tuesday, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said an independent peer review panel examining the draft report will discuss it at a public meeting in Cheyenne.

The EPA will release additional information about its work at Pavillion on the agency’s website for public review, she said.

Mead had written Jackson to ask that the agency consider a public listening session in Wyoming and include state experts on the peer review panel.

“In particular, it is positive that the EPA will require a public meeting in Wyoming as part of the peer review process and that the EPA is extending the public comment period,” Mead spokesman Renny MacKay said. “This allows the public an opportunity to thoughtfully review and analyze new information Administrator Jackson said will be posted on the EPA website.”

The 30-day peer review will follow the end of the public comment period. A notice published in the Federal Register on Tuesday says the EPA is seeking panelists with technical experience in areas including petroleum engineering, hydrology, geology and chemistry. The panelists must be impartial and not have any conflicts of interest.

Those interested may self-nominate. Nominations are due no later than Feb. 17.

The EPA released the draft report on Dec. 8 as part of its ongoing investigation into water contamination in the Pavillion area, after receiving complaints from residents in 2008.

Hydraulic fracturing, also known as fracking, is an oil and natural gas industry practice in which water, sand and chemicals are pumped underground to open new pathways for oil and natural gas to flow.

It’s a crucial tool for oil and natural gas operators in Wyoming and elsewhere. But environmentalists and others have said the practice could pollute water supplies, a claim the industry largely denies.

The EPA’s draft report was quickly hailed by opponents of hydraulic fracturing as a sign that the oil and gas industry practice taints groundwater. But industry and state officials questioned whether the EPA had

appropriately tested water in the Pavillion area or reached results tainted by politics — charges the EPA denied.