

EPA finishing up Pavillion-area monitoring wells

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has almost finished drilling two monitoring wells to test for pollution in a central Wyoming community where residents suspect chemicals related to gas drilling have contaminated their well water.

Meanwhile, the EPA has pushed back a meeting with residents of the Pavillion area. Originally planned for July, the public meeting now will be held in August.

The agency wants to make certain ahead of the meeting that homeowners have accurate information about the contamination and any health risks, EPA spokesman Richard Mylott said.

"One of the things that's become clear is getting a good health-based assessment of the many wells we've sampled is time-consuming," Mylott said Tuesday.

Area residents say chemicals related to a process called hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," may have polluted their wells. Fracking involves pumping water, sand and chemicals underground at high pressure to open fissures and improve the flow of oil or gas.

The EPA tested wells in the area in March 2009 and January 2010. Contamination is suspected in 11 water wells.

Mylott said two new wells to check for groundwater pollution are being completed and should be operational by August.

One homeowner, Louis Meeks, said the EPA considered but decided against drilling a monitoring well on his property because he'd tried drilling a new water well and hit dangerous amounts of natural gas.

"They were scared of that and so were the drillers," Meeks said Tuesday. "They didn't want to have problems."

A couple weeks ago, an EPA employee tested his water by turning on hot shower water and running a detector to see if gas was present, Meeks said.

"He did say there was a problem. There was gas there," he said.

Meeks said he hauls drinking water to his home at his own expense. His well water "reeks" from pollution, he said, and taking a shower "cleans your sinuses."

Meeks said he has health problems and so does his wife but no one seems to care.

"They're not doing anything out there for anybody, Encana," he said, referring to the company that did the gas drilling locals believe caused the pollution.

EnCana Corp. officials have said no link has been confirmed between groundwater pollution and the company's drilling in the area. The EPA expects to release its findings on a pollution source by year's end.

Encana spokesman Randy Teeuwen did not return a message Tuesday seeking comment.