

EPA seeks experts to review Wyoming pollution study

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CHEYENNE, Wyo. - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is seeking nominees for a peer review panel that will be asked to take a close look at an EPA draft report that theorizes a link between hydraulic fracturing and groundwater pollution in a Wyoming gas field.

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 also be impartial and not have any conflicts of interest.

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

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is a method for breaking open rock deposits inside oil and gas wells. The EPA draft report released last month theorized that industry activity including fracking might have polluted groundwater in the Pavillion area.

Local residents for years have complained about their well water reeking of chemicals, although the report did not speculate that fracking polluted their well water. That part of the report focused on two wells drilled to test for groundwater pollution.

Environmentalists welcomed the report as confirmation of their long-held suspicions, while the petroleum industry, including Encana Corp., the major operator in the Pavillion gas field, has cast doubt on the EPA's methodology and preliminary conclusions.

The EPA has addressed some of Encana's concerns but not others, including those having to do with construction of the monitoring wells and quality assurance of the results, Encana spokesman Doug Hock said Thursday.

"This is of particular note as these are the two primary areas of concern that Encana, the state of Wyoming and others have focused on in addressing questions as to EPA's methodology," Hock said.

Gov. Matt Mead said the EPA has committed to having a Wyoming representative on the panel. The EPA has not committed to Mead's request for additional testing before the panel meets, however.

"We have reviewed a few names with the EPA and we will continue to evaluate those names and others to determine who to nominate through the formal process that started this week. Any names we submit must go through an evaluation by an independent consultant and be free of conflicts of interest, both of which are appropriate," Mead said through spokesman Renny MacKay.

The 30-day peer review will follow a public comment period on the report that began Dec. 14.