

Fears of tainted water well up in western Colorado

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Posted: 10/11/2009



Outfitter Ned Prather, left, with his brother Dick, smells a cup of water from his spring northeast of DeBeque that is contaminated with toxins found in oil and gas production. (William Woody, Special to The Denver Post)

LOGAN MOUNTAIN — Ned Prather can't forget that awful drink of water.

He was thirsty the afternoon of May 30, 2008, after he and his wife, Dollie, drove up the dusty, steeply kinked road to their cabin an hour northeast of DeBeque. He went to the sink and filled a glass with water.

"I tipped it up just like this and just started guzzling — like an idiot. I didn't know it was bad until I drank two-thirds of the cup," said the 61-year-old outfitter as he retraced his actions that day.

His throat burned. His head pounded. His stomach hurt. He felt like he was going to suffocate.

Contaminated spring

The spring that provides water to Ned Prather's Logan Mountain cabin is contaminated with byproduct from oil and gas drilling but so far no company has taken responsibility.



Tests would show the water from a spring he has drunk from for decades was heavily contaminated with a carcinogenic and nervous system-damaging chemical stew known as BTEX — benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene. BTEX and other volatile organic compounds come to the surface in the production water from oil and gas wells.

Prather may be the only victim of oil-and-gas-field contamination to guzzle a glass of toxin-laced water. But last year, there were 206 spills in Colorado connected to or suspected in 48 cases of water contamination. Since 2003, there have been around 300 cases.

State records show BTEX has seeped into water wells when the casings designed to keep oil and gas wells from contaminating groundwater have given way. Methane, the most common contaminant found in water wells, has blown a pump house off its foundation, forced the evacuation of homes and turned tap water flammable. In Prather's part of the country, a Garfield County hydrogeologic study shows chloride is rising in many springs besides his, indicating they are being affected by drilling.

The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission investigates each contamination complaint, monitors water wells, and in the past, has issued fines and closed down oil and gas wells or leaking pits, tanks and pipelines. But finding the source of contamination can be time-consuming and complicated, particularly in Prather's case.

Eighteen wells are located within 3,000 feet of Prather's spring. An abandoned pit of reeking production water sits on one hill above the cabin. Another pit was quickly reclaimed in the days after his drink.

Nearly 8,000 gallons of diesel were spilled on one hill when a spigot was accidentally left open the winter before Prather's spring went bad. Pipelines — some more than 30 years old — snake over the hillsides nearby.

"It's a terrible situation," said Dave Neslin, director of the oil and gas commission. "This one is more complicated."

Prather hasn't talked publicly until now about his nasty drink or his frustration in getting the problem solved. He has always been a supporter of the energy industry. In fact, he and his three brothers used to work for Occidental Petroleum, a company under notice for allegedly contaminating a spring that runs on the other side of his cabin.

But 16 months after his nasty drink, no source has been pinned down for the contamination. The spring water still reeks with an odor somewhere between diesel fuel and permanent-wave solution.

And Prather has had enough.

"I've always stuck up for oil and gas, but now when we need them to stand up and do what's right, they won't," Prather said. "If I was asked what has made me the maddest in all this, it's the oil and gas commission not doing what they are supposed to do."

Three companies operating in the area — Marathon Oil Co., Petroleum Development Corp. and Nonsuch Natural Gas — have been released from notices of alleged violation. Williams Production has been released from a notice on one drill site but is still being investigated on another site above the Prathers' place.

The oil and gas commission has spent \$129,000 on the services of four environmental contractors and two chemistry laboratories and a still untallied amount on hundreds of hours of staff time and travel.

The commission also ordered the oil and gas companies to provide alternative drinking water for the Prathers' cabin and to put up a fence between the spring and the cabin. The commission had the companies locate a new spring to supply the cabin, but the Prathers are afraid to drink the water from it.

The four companies initially suspected in the contamination of Prather's drinking water formed a group to investigate the problem. They installed 44 groundwater monitoring wells and 37 soil gas probes.

As he stood out in the middle of the monitoring pipes that bristle up the draw from the Prathers' spring, attorney Richard Djokic, who represents the Prathers, called the commission's actions thus far "enforcement by negotiation" and likened the self-investigation to a bungled crime scene.

"Imagine you have a body on the ground here, and we're all standing around holding guns. A cop comes and says, 'Figure out amongst yourselves who did this and let me know.' "

Neslin argued with that analogy. He said the commission staff reviews all the companies' studies and raw data.

The companies doing the studies aren't admitting blame.

Williams Production issued a prepared statement saying, "None of the data we have collected and analyzed indicates the condensate is coming from Williams Production or its facilities."

Djokic said legal action on the matter has not been ruled out.

There is still the unknown issue of effects on Prather's health. And there is a given: Bad water has decimated his outfitting business. Hunters don't want to stay in a cabin with suspect water or to harvest deer and elk they fear could be drinking contaminated water.

Prather said in the past several years he has taken in more than \$100,000 in the outfitting business he built up over 40 years. This year he had to borrow money to return deposits from hunters who changed their minds.

And his children and grandchildren no longer want to come to the cabin.

"This is the thing," Prather said, "Me and Dollie, we were going to leave this to our grandkids one day."

When it comes to his own health, Prather has no idea what to expect.

"Not that many people have turned up a glass and drank that much benzene at one time," he said.

Prather said after he drank the water, he hopped on a four-wheeler and took a bottle of the stuff to a nearby well where he asked workers, "what did I just drink?" They didn't know, but they sniffed it and took pity on him. They gave him bottled water to ease his burning throat.

Prather's wife drove him to St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction. Doctors took multiple blood samples and did an EKG to test his heart.

He wouldn't know for 18 days, after the oil and gas commission tested the water, what he drank. The sample from the spring contained 100 micrograms per liter of BTEX. Five micrograms is the safety threshold for groundwater. A toxicologist with the oil and gas commission told him to get continued blood tests to check for liver or kidney damage.

So far, the tests show no damage. But Prather has suffered unexplained health problems dating back before the drink. His hands and head shake. The tremors have worsened lately.

While Prather worries about that, Neslin said the commission is trying to wrap up the investigation. His staff has narrowed potential sources and concluded the contamination on the Prathers' spring came from a release of condensate on the east side of the drainage, likely from a leaking pipe, pit or tank belonging to Williams.

Prather isn't satisfied. He still suspects Marathon's large diesel spill and the fracking that occurred before the spring went bad. When wells are fracked, liquids containing chemicals are forced into deep rock formations to break up the rock and allow gas to escape.

Prather's spring has now turned into a political issue. State Sen. Josh Penry, who has made criticism of the new oil and gas rules part of his gubernatorial campaign, wrote to Neslin on Prather's behalf two weeks ago. His letter stated that a commission with the time to "promulgate a raft of new rules and paperwork requirements" should have time to enforce longstanding groundwater protection rules.

Neslin replied with an outline of what has been done.

"The Prathers experience provides an example of why the COGCC developed and implemented new requirements and procedures to attempt to prevent such incidents from occurring," he wrote.

Prather agrees but said he sees few oil and gas field problems being stopped.

"I don't see anybody up there preventing anything," he said. "I think they are getting away with murder."

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