

Fracking rules sought by panel

DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER Casper Star-Tribune | Posted: Friday, November 6, 2009 12:00 am |

CASPER - Teton County commissioners passed a resolution this week urging passage of a bill currently before Congress that would further regulate the natural gas industry's practice of hydraulic fracturing.

The action was prompted by concerns over Teton County health workers possibly being exposed to unknown chemicals used in the process, noting that workers injured in neighboring Sublette County gas fields are often taken to St. John's Medical Center in Jackson.

"The Board of County Commissioners expresses its deepest concern about the lack of information about the chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing in Sublette County, in particular its potential to harm the health and safety of Teton County Health Workers," the resolution states.

With the resolution, Teton County commissioners urge Congress to pass a bill brought by U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., that would mandate more public disclosure about chemicals used in the process, as well as further analysis to ensure the protection of drinking water.

Petroleum Association of Wyoming president Bruce Hinchey dismissed the action as a runaround to make matters more difficult and expensive for the U.S. oil and gas industry.

"It's definitely coming from a bunch of environmental wackos that are pushing this," Hinchey said. "I just think it rains of the environmentalists grasping at any straw they can and using any technique they can to stop the industry and do anything to make it more costly."

Hinchey said Teton County is "different than the rest of the state," in that it doesn't have potential for or appreciation of oil and gas development.

One of the main backers of the Teton County resolution is Maureen Blum, who serves on the Teton County Health Care Board. In a written statement, Blum said medical staffers do not have access to information about chemicals on drilling sites used in hydraulic fracturing, which makes it impossible to determine the toxicology of chemicals that might be involved when treating a worker.

"The toxicity of the chemicals and the risks they pose to people are a grave concern," Blum wrote.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, refers to the practice of pumping a mixture of sand, water and other chemicals - sometimes oil and diesel - down a well bore under pressures high enough to crack gas-bearing rock deep below the surface.

Hydraulic fracturing, along with improved directional drilling techniques, are responsible for boosting the United States' domestic natural gas potential by 35 percent in the span of just two years.

This massive new "technically recoverable" reserve could allow the U.S. to continue its 2008 rate of natural gas consumption for 90 years.

Currently, individual states oversee hydraulic fracturing and the industry desperately wants to avoid the extra layer of federal regulation. State and industry officials claim there is no documented case of contaminated drinking water related to the practice of hydraulic fracturing.

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 exempted hydraulic fracturing from the Safe Drinking Water Act. This year, the Wyoming Legislature passed its own resolution calling on congress to reject DeGette's bill.

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