Industry should provide more 'fracking' info

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The state of Wyoming and the federal government seem to be in tune for once on an issue that involves energy development and environmental protection.

Last Thursday, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced it is beginning a comprehensive research study "to investigate the potential adverse impact that hydraulic fracturing may have on water quality and public health."

The process, also known as "fracking," is the practice of pressurizing a mixture of sand and various fluids to fracture gas-bearing rock deep underground, creating pathways for the gas to flow toward a well bore.

Fracking has been used in Wyoming for decades. But it wasn't until the late 1990s that refinements in the process were credited with unlocking huge gas reserves in the Jonah Field and Pinedale Anticline.

Combined with directional drilling, fracking has also unlocked major shale gas plays in Texas, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and New York in recent years. But these successes have also sparked complaints from environmental groups and public health advocates, who contend there's not enough public information about the fluids that are being pumped underground. These critics have asked the EPA to make sure these chemicals are not contaminating drinking water sources.

State regulators and industry officials maintain there has not been a single documented case of contaminated drinking water due to fracking in Wyoming. That may be true, but even if it is, one of the reasons such contamination would be difficult to prove is the fact that each company has its own "recipe" for fluids used in fracking, and such information is considered proprietary and closely guarded.

Still, Steve Jones, the Wyoming Outdoor Council's watershed protection attorney, noted that about 246 different chemicals have been discovered to be used in fracking operations. "We think that information ought to be disclosed -- the quantity and concentration -- and track where they go," he said.

It's a reasonable request. In fact, the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission is considering a proposed rule change that would require an owner or operator to provide additional, "readily available" information on fracking.

The proposal makes it clear that the commission "is not trying to determine, specify or direct the application of the appropriate hydraulic fracturing stimulation for the recovery of oil and/or gas, but to insure the protection of fresh and potable water."

If enacted, as it should be, the new rule should not pose a burden on companies operating in Wyoming. Encana Oil & Gas USA, for example, already requires its contractors that perform hydraulic fracturing to record the make-up of the fluids and track the volume of fluid pumped into a well, plus the volume that's ultimately recovered and reused.

Encana spokesman Randy Teeuwen said, "From our point of view, we have proven processes that have worked for us for decades."

It's clear that the energy development related to hydraulic fracturing has greatly benefitted Wyoming through more tax revenue generated by increased production. However, both the EPA and the state's Oil and Gas Conservation Commission seem to have at least recognized that the public needs more information about how fracking may be affecting our drinking water supplies. Monitoring what chemicals are used and where they go is the only real way to find out if the process is safe.