

'Something has happened'



John Fenton examines a what he suspects should be a plugged natural gas well on his in-laws' ranch near Pavillion in this photo from 2007. Fenton and others in the community believe their water has been fouled by oil and gas activity. (Dustin Bleizeffer/Star-Tribune)

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PAVILLION -- A glass of water drawn from John Fenton's underground well outside his rural log home built against a rocky ridge looks and tastes as clear and refreshing as any bottled water.

But Fenton's water contains traces of arsenic, barium, cobalt, copper and other compounds identified in water tests that cannot be seen, smelled or tasted.

"It definitely makes you think every time you turn the faucet on," said Fenton, who farms hay on about 200 acres outside his home.

He and other residents outside this small rural, farming community blame their water woes -- and what they perceive to be the unusual health problems in their midst -- on hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," a common technique used in drilling new oil and gas wells.

Those kind of complaints have surfaced across the county in areas where energy producers use fracking. But the industry says the practice is safe, and the federal government has exempted the process from its oversight.

Fracking involves injecting water, sand and chemicals under high pressure into the ground to force open channels in deep tight sand and rock formations so that oil and gas can be more easily recovered. Fracking has been used for decades, but improvements in the process and new drilling techniques have led to its use in unlocking heretofore large, unrecoverable natural gas reserves.

Some states are investigating complaints associated with fracking, but this community in central Wyoming is the only place where the Environmental Protection Agency has opened its own investigation, according to agency officials. Here, Fenton and his neighbors formed their own advocacy group, Pavillion Area Concerned Citizens, and pleaded with the EPA and state environmental officials to test their water wells.

Preliminary EPA testing in Pavillion has found traces of toxins in some drinking water wells, but the EPA is doing more tests to determine how much is there, whether it poses a health hazard and where it came

from.

EnCana Corp., which owns the Pavillion gas field, says there's no evidence its operations have caused the water problems and there could be any number of sources of the contamination in a field that has been drilled for many years.

Legislation has been introduced in Congress that would place fracking under oversight of the Environmental Protection Agency. Industry is fighting the proposal as unwarranted and as a potential killer of both jobs and the its ability to tap the nation's abundant supplies of natural gas.

"You're familiar with the Jed Clampett well where you have a shotgun and you shoot it down there and the oil pops right out; they're all gone," said Chris Tucker, spokesman for Energy in Depth, an industry coalition formed to fight off federal regulation of fracking. "Now we produce much further down and have to use technology that is much more advanced."

Detractors contend fracking uses dangerous toxins and compounds and disturbs underground geology, fouling underground water sources and damaging water wells.

"There are numerous reports of groundwater contamination from this, but because fracturing is an unregulated practice nobody is monitoring the situation," said Gwen Lachelt, director of the Oil and Gas Accountability Project, a program of Earthworks, a nonprofit environmental watchdog group.

Currently, fracking is exempt from federal regulation because an EPA study determined in 2004 there was no evidence that fracking threatened drinking water. Critics sat the study was flawed.

The two sides also disagree over whether the individual states or the EPA should regulate fracking, and over whether the industry has adequately disclosed the contents of the fracking fluids.

Legislation introduced in Congress by Democratic Reps. Diana DeGette of Colorado and Maurice Hinchey of New York would place fracking under federal oversight.

DeGette's spokesman, Kristofer Eisenla, said the congresswoman recognizes the need for fracking to recover natural gas, but she also is concerned about stories of people losing wells and having drinking water contaminated in areas where fracking has taken place.

The EnCana gas field just outside Pavillion, population of about 165, is located on the Wind River Indian Reservation. The area is marked with buttes and rivers and streams that drain water from surrounding mountain ranges into the Wind River.

Looking out from Fenton's front porch, which runs long the width of his home, the Owl Creek Mountains rise in the distance on the far end of a lush, green, irrigated valley where Fenton raises hay and where a few homes are nestled in clumps of trees. Within about 100 feet of Fenton's porch and interspersed throughout the valley are small colonies of industry tanks, pipes and small buildings painted a beige, earth-tone color.

EnCana spokesman Randy Teeuwen said that drilling in the Pavillion field occurred for decades before his company acquired the field in 2004 and drilled more wells using the fracking technique.

Teeuwen said the company made sure it stayed away from groundwater that is used for drinking by area residents. Encana stopped drilling the area in 2006.

But residents say they began to notice water becoming discolored and smelling different.

Fenton said his mother-in-law lost her sense of smell and taste; another neighbor contracted a rare cancer; others reported seizures, miscarriages and liver disease.

Eleven of 39 wells tested here by the EPA this year showed some toxins, including the compounds found in Fenton's well. Two wells serving the town were found to be clean. EPA advised owners of contaminated wells to stop using them until it could do more testing.

"Something has happened to affect the quality of the water," said Fenton, a tall, lean man with large hands and a soft grip, "and the only thing that we know that's been done is the drilling of the gas wells."

But Tucker said the toxins and compounds could have come from any number of sources, including how previous oil and gas companies active in the field handled wastewater pumped out with the gas and stored in pits, which may not have been lined properly.