

Costs would be shared by state, EPA and Encana

Wyoming Gov. Mead wants broader inquiry into Pavillion water

By JEREMY FUGLEBERG Star-Tribune energy reporter | Posted: Thursday, December 1, 2011 9:00 pm

Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead is calling for a broader investigation into groundwater contamination in a central Wyoming natural gas field.

Some residents in the Pavillion area say the development of natural gas resources in the area is to blame for spoiling their water.

State, tribal and federal officials, as well as residents and the natural gas company in the Pavillion area, are already investigating why some water wells there are contaminated. A separate federal investigation recently discovered high levels of methane, benzene and other chemicals in monitoring wells.

Mead's proposed 2013-14 budget, which was released Thursday, didn't allocate any money for an expanded Pavillion study, but he said any costs would be shared among the state, the EPA and Encana.

"A broader investigation into Pavillion's groundwater issues is warranted," he said.

In the budget request, Mead said state officials are in talks with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and industry members related to an additional investigation.

The investigation would hunt down the source of contaminants and determine the extent of the contamination. That would likely require new monitoring wells drilled to different depths in an effort to map the subsurface geology and water.

"They will result in a clearer understanding of the Pavillion groundwater challenges and assist in determining a resolution," the governor said in his budget request.

The broader state investigation would join several already in progress.

In early November, the EPA released results from two monitoring wells and other wells in the area, as part of its ongoing Superfund investigation into complaints by area residents. Those results showed wells with high levels of methane, benzene and other chemicals.

While the EPA has yet to draw conclusions about the data, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said the agency's test well results were "of concern," and she said the industry practice of hydraulic fracturing could be responsible for the contamination.

Jackson's speculation was disputed by Calgary, Alberta-based Encana Corp., the natural gas operator in the Pavillion area.

"The science remains inconclusive, in terms of data, impact and source," company spokesman Doug Hock said.

Hydraulic fracturing, often known as fracking, is a common industry practice in which water, sand and chemicals are pumped underground to fracture open pathways for oil and gas to flow.

The practice is decades-old but wasn't widely used until recent years. Fracking is now used for nearly all oil and natural gas development in Wyoming.

The practice has drawn concern among residents and environmental activists in the state and in other parts of the U.S. who fear it's responsible for polluting water supplies.

The EPA expects to release conclusions from its Superfund groundwater investigation next spring.

Mead “wants to be very thorough at looking at those results and making sure they’re science-based,” said Renny MacKay, the governor’s spokesman. “He feels that if these concerns continue, as we look at these results from those test wells, it might be necessary to drill a couple more wells, and he feels the state should step up and be part of that.”

The EPA didn’t respond to a telephone and email request for comment on Mead’s call for a broader investigation.

State and federal regulators, as well as Encana Corp. and residents, are also conducting an investigation into drilling-related pits — including some from previous decades — that may have contaminated wells in the area. State regulators and the company have regularly speculated those pits, as well as natural causes, could explain the condition of well water in the area.

Encana spokesman Randy Teeuwen said it’s premature to talk about the status of discussions leading toward a broader investigation in Pavillion. If the investigation did take place, Encana “would, as the governor indicated, be a partner,” Teeuwen said.