

Feds launch study on procedure's effect on water quality, public health

Wyoming may modify 'fracking' rules

By DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER - Star-Tribune energy reporter | Posted: Friday, March 19, 2010

In order to protect fresh and potable water, state regulators may require the oil and gas industry to provide more detailed and readily available information about hydraulic fracturing activities.

The Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission -- the primary agency that oversees such activities -- is now in the process of amending its rules requiring additional information and disclosure.

Deadline for public comment on the proposed rule changes is noon Monday.

"At least they're beginning to address hydraulic fracturing. That's a good thing because it is increasingly a method used to extract oil and gas in Wyoming and the rest of the country," said Steve Jones, watershed protection program attorney for the Wyoming Outdoor Council.

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

Hydraulic fracturing -- or "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.

The practice has been in use for decades in Wyoming, but it wasn't until the late 1990s when the practice was refined enough to unlock huge gas reserves such as in the Jonah field and Pinedale Anticline. In recent years, hydraulic fracturing and directional drilling has unlocked shale gas plays in Texas, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and New York.

As the practice has become more widespread, it has also come under more scrutiny from environmental and public health advocates. They say there's not enough information about the fluids being pumped underground and not enough assurances that the chemicals are not getting into drinking water sources.

"We commend EPA for investigating this controversial gas drilling technique. From Wyoming to Pennsylvania, people are worried about what this untested process is doing to their drinking water," Earthjustice legislative associate Jessica Ennis said in a media release on Thursday.

State regulators in Wyoming and industry officials claim there's no single documented incident of drinking water contamination because of hydraulic fracturing in Wyoming. But Jones contends there's been no way to know because there's not been an adequate attempt to monitor the activity.

"The problem with fracking is industry has described it as mini-earthquakes. We don't have a good idea of how much this can shake up the formations and how far some of the fluids that are used spread," said Jones.

The Wyoming Outdoor Council will likely recommend that state regulators impose a half-mile setback from water wells and surface water resources, and to require additional efforts to "case" well bores where they do pass through aquifers which could provide drinking water.

Industry officials have said each company tends to have its own recipe for fluids used in hydraulic fracturing, and they guard it as proprietary information. Water makes up a big percentage of the recipe, but the fluids often include diesel fuel and various chemicals.

"There's some 246 chemicals that have been discovered to be used in these hydraulic fracture operations," said Jones. "We think that information ought to be disclosed -- the quantity and concentration -- and track where they go."

Randy Teeuwen, spokesman for EnCana Oil & Gas USA, said the company will submit written comments to the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission regarding the proposed rule changes. However, Teeuwen said he could not provide specifics because EnCana's comments had not yet been submitted.

"It's a negotiating process," Teeuwen told the Star-Tribune. "Yeah, there are things we'd like to see qualified and negotiated."

Teeuwen said EnCana requires its contractors that perform hydraulic fracturing to carefully record the make-up of the fluids as well as track the volume of fluid pumped into a well and the volume that's ultimately recovered.

He said a high percentage of the fluids are actually recovered from each hydraulic fracture job and recycled for the next job.

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

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To comment

Written comments must be mailed to the State Oil and Gas Supervisor, P. O. Box 2640, Casper, WY 82602-2640, or faxed in advance to the state oil and gas supervisor at (307) 234-5306. Comments must be received by the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission by noon Monday.

Proposed rule change

From Chapter 3, Section 8 (i) (A)

"The intent of this section is to protect fresh and potable (USDW) water by requiring the Owner or Operator to expand upon information currently provided by requesting additional, readily available, information to the Commission. By this section 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 protection of fresh and potable (USDW) water."

To see the proposed rule changes in their entirety, go to http://wogcc.state.wy.us/2009_proposed_rules_menu.cfm