

Wyoming approves 'fracking' disclosure rules

Mead Gruver, Associated Press, 6-9-10

CHEYENNE, Wyo. -- A state agency that oversees oil and gas development voted Tuesday to require energy companies to disclose what chemicals they're pumping underground to improve the flow of oil and gas into well bores.

The state Oil and Gas Conservation Commission unanimously approved the new rules, which cover a variety of drilling practices including hydraulic fracturing. Commonly called "fracking," the process involves pumping pressurized water, sand and chemicals underground to crack open fissures in rock.

Environmentalists said they approve of the new rules, and industry officials said they can live with the changes.

"They appear on the surface to be workable," said Rick Robitaille, vice president of the Petroleum Association of Wyoming. "As we go down further in time and see how they progress, perhaps we will need to tweak, perhaps not. It remains to be seen."

Wider use of hydraulic fracturing in Wyoming and elsewhere has raised concern about fracking fluids contaminating groundwater. That has led to a push for U.S. Environmental Protection Agency oversight of the practice.

Wyoming's rules resulted largely from Gov. Dave Freudenthal wanting clear guidelines ahead of any EPA regulations, said Wyoming Oil and Gas Supervisor Tom Doll.

"I know on the national scene, people were waiting for a state to come forward. I think we're one of the first, if not the first," Doll said.

Hydraulic fracturing is widely employed in western Wyoming's gas fields. It is imperative for the practice to continue, Freudenthal said in a statement.

"But it is imperative that it continue in a way that is properly supervised and overseen by the Wyoming Oil and Gas Commission," said the Democratic governor, who is one of the five state oil and gas commissioners.

Energy companies have been hesitant to disclose details about their fracking fluids. Disclosing the secret formulas, they say, could hurt their competitiveness.

Wyoming's rules emphasize that any parts of the companies' recipes that are considered trade secrets would be protected from public disclosure under the state's open records laws.

Shell Oil Co., the U.S. arm of Royal Dutch Shell PLC, believes fracking is safe, especially when companies follow strict standards for well bore integrity, said Darci Sinclair, a Shell spokeswoman in Denver.

"While the rules and guidelines are obviously tougher, we'll meet the new requirement and we understand why the commission wanted to do this," Sinclair said.

The companies point out that fracking has occurred for decades without any substantiated cases of the

chemicals contaminating groundwater. Environmentalists say that knowing the chemicals in fracking fluids will make it easier to pinpoint the pollution source if it ever happens.

"It's going to be important for landowners and the public to get access to that information, to know what fluids they are using," said Steve Jones, an attorney for the Wyoming Outdoor Council.

Stronger rules would have required baseline testing of groundwater before fracking took place, Jones said. But he called the new rules a "step forward."