

EPA Requests Fracking Chemicals from Nine Companies

Angela Modany, Reuters, 9-22-10

The Environmental Protection Agency began to prepare for its upcoming study on the effects of hydraulic fracturing on drinking water by sending letters to hydraulic fracturing service providers that requested the list of chemicals used in the natural gas extracting process.

Nine companies received the letter, including BJ Services, Complete Production Services, Halliburton, Key Energy Services, Patterson-UTI, RPC Inc., Schlumberger, Superior Well Services and Weatherford.

Hydraulic fracturing, commonly referred to as "fracking," uses a mixture of water, sand and chemicals blasted at high pressures to open up seams in rock, which allows natural gas to escape. The worry is that the chemicals in the fracking mixture contaminate the groundwater used for drinking. Companies that practice fracking have not disclosed the names of chemicals they use in the past because they say they are "trade secrets." The EPA wants the companies to reveal the chemicals to help its upcoming study.

"By sharing information about the chemicals and methods they are using, these companies will help us make a thorough and efficient review of hydraulic fracturing and determine the best path forward," EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson said in a press release on Sept. 9.

According to the press release, the EPA requested the companies reply within seven days on whether they will voluntarily comply with the EPA's request. The agency also asked that any information from the companies be given within 30 days. To companies who choose not to cooperate, the EPA gave this warning: "EPA is prepared to use its authorities to require the information needed to carry out its study."

Stephanie Meadows, a senior policy adviser for the American Petroleum Institute, which represents oil and natural gas companies, was confused by the "threat."

"I'm not sure how they would do that, or if they even have the authority to do that," she told The New York Times. "I'm little disappointed with the threats, because I thought we'd made it clear all along that we want to be helpful."

In the past, though, fracking companies have not been helpful and compliant. According to a Bloomberg Businessweek story from 2008, Halliburton, one of the companies who received the EPA's letter, "threatened to cease natural-gas operations in Colorado if regulators there persisted in demanding the chemical recipe."

The EPA sent the letters days before its last public hearings on fracking in Binghamton, N.Y. The public hearings, which began in July, are a preliminary step before the EPA's study begins in 2011. It will look at how fracking effects the environment, human health and drinking water.

According to the AP, the EPA anticipated so many supporters and opponents of fracking at these last hearings that they postponed them twice until they finally held them this week.

Fracking supporters, like the Independent Oil and Gas Association, say the practice helps decrease the nation's dependency on foreign fuels and creates jobs.

Opponents are concerned about health and clean drinking water issues. "Protect our water. Stop fracking America," one sign at the hearing said.

"There's no way this can be done safely. It will toxify the air, water and soil," Kathy Shimberg of Mount Vision, N.Y. told the AP.

With the last of the public hearings over, the EPA is now waiting for responses from the nine fracking companies as it prepares for its study. Jackson said: "EPA will do everything in its power, as it is obligated to do, to protect the health of the American people," she said.