

Is Fracking Poisoning Our Food?

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Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, could be putting food supplies at risk. According to a report on Alternet.com, fracking fluid leaks have been blamed for injuring and killing livestock, and there are fears that the accumulation of fracking chemicals in soil could put crops at risk. It's unclear right now how this might impact human health.

We've already reported on several incidents where livestock was harmed by fracking fluid leaks. Last year, for example, 17 cows in Caddo Parish, Louisiana allegedly died after consuming fluid that spilled from a natural gas wellpad operated by Chesapeake Energy. As we reported, preliminary investigation linked the deaths to chemicals that spilled off the well site into a nearby pasture, and the farmer was compensated by Chesapeake. The energy company also said it took steps to prevent future similar occurrences.

Just this past spring, some cows in Pennsylvania had to be quarantined after coming into contact with a pool of toxic wastewater from a hydraulic fracturing operation. The pool, which contained the heavy metal strontium, formed as a result of a leak in a wastewater holding pond on a farm in Tioga County. Eastern Resources Inc. was drilling for natural gas on the property. According to Alternet.com, no one is sure how much fracking fluid leaked from the operation's 650,000-gallon disposal pit, but it was enough to kill a 30' by 40' patch of pasture nearby.

According to Alternet.com, Pennsylvania's Department of Agriculture doesn't know if any other cows in the state came into contact with fracking fluid before the spring incident, and it can't guarantee similar problems won't happen in the future.

Greg Swartz, a farmer in Pennsylvania's Upper Delaware River Valley told Alternet.com that he fears that leaked fracking fluid could seep into his soil, accumulate in his plants and put his organic certification at risk. Swartz reported that some of his customers have already expressed concerns about drilling operations near his land.

"There very well may be a point where I am not comfortable selling vegetables from the farm anymore because I'm concerned about water and air contamination issues," he told Alternet.com.

According to Alternet.com, Swartz has good reason to worry. In 2009, a tomato farmer in Avella, Pennsylvania reported a series of problems with the water and soil on his property after drilling started: he found arsenic levels 2,600 times what is recommended, as well as dangerously high levels of benzene and naphthalene – all known fracking components.

While few studies have been done to examine fracking's impact on food supplies, Alternet.com said what has been done is less than reassuring:

"One, titled "Livestock Poisoning from Oil Field Drilling Fluids, Muds and Additives," appeared in the journal Veterinary & Human Toxicology in 1991. It examined seven instances where oil and gas wells had poisoned and/or killed livestock. In one such case, green liquid was found leaking from a tank near a gas well site. The study's authors found 13 dead cows, whose 'postmortem blood was chocolate-brown in color.' Poisoning cases involving carbon disulfide, turpentine, toluene, xylene, ethylene, and complex solvent mixtures 'are frequently encountered,' the study concluded."

The drilling industry, of course, characterizes such occurrences as “isolated incidents”, but Wes Gillingham, program director of Catskill Mountainkeeper, told Alternet.com that many violations are never reported. But like many of those interviewed for the Alternet.com article, Gillingham could not say exactly how much risk fracking contamination poses to food supplies.

“It’s an important piece of research that needs to be done,” Gillingham said.