

New Lawsuit Filed in Fracking Country

Tom Zeller, New York Times, 9-15-10

More than a dozen families in Susquehanna County, Pa., filed a lawsuit late Tuesday against the Southwestern Energy Production Company asserting that a succession of “releases, spills, and discharges of combustible gases, hazardous chemicals, and industrial wastes” from the company’s nearby drilling sites have contaminated their drinking water and made them sick.

In simpler terms, it’s the latest salvo against hydraulic fracturing — a long-used and highly contentious drilling technique that has come under more intense scrutiny as energy prospectors descend on newly accessible gas deposits under vast areas of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio and New York.

It’s not the first such lawsuit, and it comes amid a flurry of other legal, regulatory and political maneuvering around the topic at the local, state and federal levels.

Most notable among these is a study currently being developed by the Environmental Protection Agency with the aim of determining whether hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, as it is sometimes known, is a threat to drinking water and human health. The process involves the high-pressure, deep-underground injection of water, sand and chemicals to break up rock formations and release natural gas.

Industry has long claimed it is safe, but residents and environmental groups say they have overwhelming evidence to the contrary — including a proliferating crop of Youtube videos demonstrating the ability to set tap water aflame.

A draft of the most recent lawsuit was provided by the law firm representing the Susquehanna residents.

New York State legislators, meanwhile, are considering a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing until it can be more closely studied and shown to be safe.