

Panel rules against homeowner who said fracking fouled well

Man loses drilling case

Mark Jaffe, Denver Post, 2-23-11

The controversial oil-industry technique known as fracking went on trial at the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission on Tuesday — and fracking won.

Tracy Dahl, who owns a home in the North Fork Ranch subdivision in Las Animas County, was seeking a judgment from the commission against Pioneer Natural Resources for fouling his well. Dahl's case centered on the fact that his well filled with sediment last June 30 — the same day Pioneer fracked its Alibi well about 1,300 feet away.

Hydraulic fracturing, a 60-year-old production technique, has come under increasing scrutiny as it has been combined with new drilling methods that are opening new areas to oil and gas development.

Fracking forces a fluid — mainly water with sand and propellants — under pressure into a well to crack the rock and release extra oil and gas. About 95 percent of the wells in Colorado are fracked.

Dahl told the commission he had pumped gallons and gallons of water out of the well and still the water was silted. Tests have found traces of diesel and solvents. "The aquifer has been seriously impacted," Dahl told the commission as he sat before three jars of murky water.

Dahl's arguments, however, were rebutted by commission staff and Pioneer.

Peter Gintautus, a commission environmental specialist, inspected the Dahl property July 1, took samples and returned for additional samples. There were no traces of fracking fluid or natural gas in the well, Gintautus said. And the well's turbidity and bacterial counts were within the acceptable standards, he said.

Gintautus told the commission that some of the problems may have been caused by a chlorination treatment Dahl had done to the well a few weeks earlier.

Kevin Tanner, a Pioneer engineer, testified that the distance from the fracture zone to Dahl's well was 1,283 feet and that a frac on average extends 150 to 200 feet horizontally and about 30 feet vertically. The process would have lost pressure if it had gone farther or hit a natural fracture, he said.

"There is no question there is something wrong with your well," commission member Mark Cut right said. "The question is whether you proved fracking impacted your well."

The commission, in a unanimous vote, ruled Dahl had not.

"Alibi is a good name for that well," Dahl said.

The commission investigates dozens of well complaints each year.