

# Bill meant to ease fears over fracking

*Related work blamed for tainted water elsewhere.*

**Tracy Idell Hamilton, San Antonio Express News, 6-11-11**

Presuming Gov. Rick Perry signs HB 3328, which is sitting on his desk, the Railroad Commission will begin writing the rules industry must follow when identifying the many chemicals used to unlock hydrocarbons in deep shale formations such as Eagle Ford.

Environmentalists have expressed cautious optimism about the new law, and the oil and gas industry has, for the most part, embraced the necessity of disclosure.

But the relentless focus on hydraulic fracturing, a process that shoots millions of gallons of chemically laced water and sand into deep shale formations to release the oil and gas, may be overshadowing other legitimate concerns that have increased along with the country's new drilling boom.

For years now, industry has repeated the mantra that fracking has never been directly tied to water contamination.

But for residents of Pavillion, Wyo., who are drinking bottled water because local aquifers are tainted, or Dimock, Pa., who have dealt with contaminated water wells and a blowout that sent chemically laced water into nearby streams, that rings hollow.

Fracking, which is often just a two- or three-day process, may not have directly caused contamination, but the activities on either side — the drilling, well casing, cement jobs and then production of the well — have been implicated.

Matt Watson, a senior energy policy analyst with the Environmental Defense Fund, which helped Rep. Jim Keffer, R-Eastland, craft the frack fluid disclosure bill, calls the industry's semantic parsing “a major distraction. People end up shadowboxing instead of working on the real issues.”

The disclosure bill is a good start, he said, emphasizing that the strength of the law rests with the Railroad Commission, which regulates oil and gas drilling in Texas.

Long considered a friend to industry, it has been criticized in both this year's and the 2001 Sunset Commission reports for limited enforcement actions against violators.

The new law will allow public health officials and others to study the impact of chemicals used in the fracturing process, he said.

But it won't address other concerns, such as how frack fluids — indeed all drilling wastes — are handled on the ground, whether containment pits are properly managed, or whether there are enough regulators to make sure well casing and cement jobs are secure.

Commissioner Elizabeth Ames Jones, the state's top oil and gas regulator, has promised “common sense” rules that will “instill confidence and allay concerns” regarding the controversial drilling practice, but that also would protect companies' proprietary information.

HB 3328 would allow companies to keep private any chemicals it deems trade secrets.

But Ames Jones also has been harsh in her criticism of those she says “insist on perpetuating fairy tales” that fracking fluids can migrate into underground water sources. Such migration is “geologically impossible,” she told a Department of Energy panel recently.

She cites the work of Michael J. Economides, professor of chemical and biomolecular engineering at the University of Houston, a private energy consultant and editor-in-chief of the Energy Tribune.

Economides, who has written books on the subject and says he has personally overseen the fracking of 2,000 wells, said the claim that fracking can foul water supplies “could be the most preposterous claim of environmentalists” ever perpetuated on an unsuspecting public.

“It's just made up, OK?” he said.

Other geologists aren't willing to make such definitive statements.

“It's highly unlikely, but to say it's impossible is not right, either,” said Chip Groat, director of the Center for International Energy and Environmental Policy and the Energy and Mineral Resources Graduate Program at the University of Texas at Austin.

Groat is leading a nine-month, \$300,000 study that will look at the entire drilling process and the allegations of environmental harm associated with it, including water and air contamination, even earthquakes.

It's important to look beyond fracking, Groat agrees. The assumption has been that when something has gone wrong it's because of fracking, he said. But scientists and regulators are coming to understand that contamination could be the result of any part of the drilling process.

The EPA, which does not regulate fracking, also is studying the entire life cycle of the drilling process.

After studying all the complaints, Groat says his group hopes to identify best practices and make sure the proper regulations are in place to protect the environment.

Ames Jones notes the Railroad Commission long has regulated parts of the drilling process, and she concedes there are risks. But she's adamant that regulating authority should remain with the states.

“Our job is to be vigilant when it comes to individual well integrity and design, casing and cement, as that is where the potential for a leak could occur, and also have processes in place for getting permits out to the operator in a timely manner,” she said.