

# **BLM chief says fracking is safe but wants disclosure, blowout regs**

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Bureau of Land Management Director Bob Abbey today said a common technique used to stimulate oil and natural gas wells in the West is not a safety threat to human health or public lands.

But companies that utilize hydraulic fracturing to loosen oil and gas deposits from tight shale formations should voluntarily disclose the chemicals they use to avoid a public "backlash" and ensure natural gas production is able to expand on federal lands, Abbey said.

"We have not seen evidence of any adverse effects as a result of the use of the chemicals that are a part of that fracking technology," Abbey said today following a House hearing on BLM's 2012 budget request.

Abbey said his agency will be hosting three meetings in April in North Dakota, Colorado and Arkansas to discuss the specific technologies used to fracture wells.

BLM also is considering additional regulations that would ensure wells are built to prevent blowouts and keep fracturing fluids from escaping into water supplies or underground aquifers.

"We want to make sure the well integrity is sound," he said, adding that industry already does a "pretty darn good job" using best management practices in constructing wells on public lands.

Top Interior officials, in fact, have been contemplating the disclosure of fracturing chemicals and new well integrity standards as early as August, according to an e-mail exchange obtained by E&E from the state of Wyoming that was part of the state's Freedom of Information Act request.

"Our goal was to [affect a] change in disclosure requirements and advancing/approving state of the art technologies for conducting fracking operations," BLM Deputy Director Mike Pool said in an August 2010 e-mail to Interior Deputy Secretary David Hayes.

Pool added BLM was considering what administrative latitude his agency has to condition drilling permits on new standards as opposed to undertaking a formal rulemaking. "Should have everything flushed out and proposed for consideration by September 2," he wrote.

In November, the Interior Department announced it is considering issuing a regulation to require the disclosure of fracturing chemicals. About 90 percent of wells drilled on public lands now require hydraulic fracturing, the agency estimates.

Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.), an outspoken critic of the hydraulic fracturing process who introduced a bill last Congress to require public disclosure of chemicals, today urged Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to force companies to disclose chemicals used in drilling on public lands. "This is just common sense," he said.

But Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.) cautioned Salazar against imposing any nationwide standards for natural gas drilling, arguing that the technology is best regulated at the state level.

"This is not a new technology," Cole said during a House Appropriations subcommittee hearing today on the Interior budget. "I would be very careful about a national regulatory system when states already regulate this quite well."

Salazar said he believed the future for natural gas was "very bright" but repeated earlier statements that the failure of companies to disclose information on the fracturing process could turn public opinion against the industry.

Fracturing is "the Achilles' heel that could essentially kill natural gas," Salazar said, adding that Interior would like to finalize its hydraulic fracturing regulations within the next several months.

The fracturing process injects large volumes of water at high pressures to create or enlarge fractures and then pumps a "propping agent" into the well to keep the fractures from closing to allow the flow of oil or gas.

The process has been used for more than 50 years but has recently come under attack from environmental groups and public health advocates who argue companies should be forced to disclose the chemicals they inject in case they are spilled, are discharged or accidentally migrate into underground sources of drinking water.

Wyoming and Colorado have recently established state regulations that include disclosure of chemicals and new standards to ensure wells are fortified to prevent escape of fluids.

The fracturing issue has been raised frequently by lawmakers on Capitol Hill in recent weeks as Interior and U.S. EPA officials defend the Obama administration's proposed 2012 budget.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson last week told House appropriators that she won't let politics trump science as the agency continues a two-year study into whether hydraulic fracturing is a threat to drinking water supplies.

She was responding to findings in a recent series of *New York Times* articles highlighting potential risks of radioactive drilling wastewater released to surface waters in Pennsylvania, among other public health risks.