

Interior Considers Fracking Regulations; PA Says Radioactivity Levels Normal

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The Department of the Interior is considering enacting regulations on the natural gas drilling process known as fracking, as Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has announced test results showing that river waters downstream of fracking operations have normal or lower amounts of radioactivity.

Interior secretary Ken Salazar told a hearing of the House Committee on Natural Resources that his agency is considering new regulations requiring drillers to disclose the chemicals they use in fracking, the New York Times reports.

Salazar said his department is conducting a review of reports that radioactive material from drilling wastewater is ending up in rivers and streams, in addition to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) study already being planned.

Fracking, also called hydraulic fracturing, uses water, particles and chemicals injected underground at high pressure to break up shale and release natural gas.

The process appears to have come under renewed government scrutiny in the wake of a series of New York Times investigative pieces. One article said hydrofracking has sometimes discharged radioactive wastewater into rivers that supply drinking water to millions of people in Pennsylvania and Maryland. The Times reported that in some EPA documents, scientists warned that the wastewater is a threat to drinking water in Pennsylvania.

But the Pennsylvania DEP said radioactivity was at or below normal levels in tests of water quality in seven rivers, at stations downstream of plants that treat wastewater from drilling in the Marcellus Shale, in November and December 2010.

"We deal in facts based on sound science," said DEP acting Secretary Michael Krancer. "Here are the facts: all samples were at or below background levels of radioactivity; and all samples showed levels below the federal drinking water standard for Radium 226 and 228."

The sampling stations were installed last fall specifically to monitor potential impacts of Marcellus drilling. The water sources tested will receive further treatment before entering the public water supplies, Krancer said.

The stations tested were the Monongahela at Charleroi in Allegheny County; South Fork Ten Mile Creek in Greene County; Conemaugh in Indiana County; Allegheny at Kennerdell in Venango County; Beaver in Beaver County; Tioga in Tioga County; and the West Branch of the Susquehanna in Lycoming County.

The EPA earlier this month released a draft plan to study the impacts of hydrofracking on drinking water. The plan is being reviewed by the agency's Science Advisory Board this week, and the study will begin soon after, with initial results available by late 2012.

But testifying before Congress on Thursday, EPA administrator Lisa Jackson appeared to signal additional review actions. She said she would order radioactivity testing at treatment plants that receive wastewater from drilling operations, and at drinking water intake stations downstream from the wastewater facilities.

"The E.P.A. is very interested in ensuring that we get data on radioactivity," Jackson said at hearings of the House appropriations subcommittee on the environment. "I do believe additional information is due the public as a result of that [New York Times] series."

Jackson said she would visit EPA offices in Philadelphia to investigate whether political concerns have muffled some scientists' warnings about the safety of fracking.