

EPA Chief Defends Forthcoming Fracking Study, Says It Will 'Add To' Dialogue

Kate Sheppard, Huffington Post, 4-22-15

WASHINGTON -- The Environmental Protection Agency is expected to release a much-anticipated draft study this spring that will examine whether hydraulic fracturing can contaminate ground water supplies. While the topic of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, for natural gas has generated a lot of attention, it's not clear whether the agency's study will clear up any of the major lingering questions about the safety of the process.

Fracking uses a high-pressure stream of water, sand and chemicals to tap into oil and gas reserves in rock formations, and has become increasingly common in recent years in many parts of the United States. There are a number of indications that the EPA's study will not resolve many of the key concerns communities have raised about fracking's impact on the safety of their drinking water supplies. As Inside Climate News reported last month, the agency's ability to gather data has been limited, due to both resistance from the oil and gas industry and legal limitations on the information the EPA was able to demand.

In an interview with The Huffington Post, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy defended the study, arguing that it will be helpful to state oil and gas regulators.

"I think EPA will really add to this dialogue," McCarthy said. "We have people already working with states to make sure that when we lay this study out that they'll be able to absorb what it says, learn from it, and move forward to ensure that they can continue to protect their drinking water supplies and all of their other water resources they rely on."

She said the study will come out later this spring as planned, and will go to an EPA science advisory board for additional peer review. The study is not expected to include policy or regulatory recommendations.

Although states are the main regulators of oil and gas development on private land, Congress tasked the EPA five years ago with studying potential concerns about the effect of fracking on drinking water.

"We're excited to put it out, because we do think it will be another lens for states to look at this issue," McCarthy said of the study. "They are the primary audience for this. And let me explain to you why. States really are the primary regulator of water supplies. And they have been individually looking at the issues of hydro fracking because they care about their water supplies."

The EPA chief also said that assessing concerns about hydraulic fracturing is a priority for the Obama administration, which has touted the benefits of natural gas as a lower-emissions alternative to electricity generation.

"The president cares about continuing to see the benefits that fracking provides in terms of low natural gas [prices], increasing national security, but he always says it has to be done safe and responsibly," McCarthy said.

McCarthy also argued that officials know fracking can be done safely, as long as the proper precautions are taken. "The good news about drinking water is that we really do know how to construct a well," she

said. "These are not out-of-the-loop new technologies we're seeking to identify. This is standard engineering practice."

"We can develop best management practices that actually address these issues and work with states on how to get that information out, and how they can begin to rely on that to ensure they're using EPA science to their best advantage."