

Obama Administration Unveils Federal Fracking Regulations

Coral Davenport, New York Times, 3-20-15

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration on Friday unveiled the nation's first major federal regulations on hydraulic fracturing, the controversial technique for oil and gas drilling that has led to a dramatic increase in American energy production but has also raised concerns about health and safety risks.

The Interior Department began drafting the rules in Mr. Obama's first term after breakthroughs in the technology, also known as fracking, led to a surge in the production of oil and gas.

The fracking boom has put the United States on track to soon become the world's largest oil and gas producer. But environmentalists fear that the technique, which involves injecting a cocktail of chemicals deep underground to fracture the rocks around oil and gas deposits, could contaminate surrounding water supplies and wildlife.

The new rules will apply only to oil and gas wells drilled on public lands, even though the vast majority of fracking in the United States is done on private land. The rules will cover about 100,000 wells, according to the Interior Department.

"Current federal well-drilling regulations are more than 30 years old, and they simply have not kept pace with the technical complexities of today's hydraulic fracturing operations," said the interior secretary, Sally Jewell.

The regulations, which are to take effect in 90 days, will allow government workers to inspect and validate the safety and integrity of the cement barriers that line fracking wells. They will require companies to publicly disclose the chemicals used in the fracturing process within 30 days of completing fracking operations.

The rules will also set safety standards for how companies can store used fracking chemicals around well sites, and will require companies to submit detailed information on well geology to the Bureau of Land Management, a part of the Interior Write a comment

Oil and gas companies have resisted fracking regulations, fearing that they could raise the cost of fracking and slow or freeze energy development. They have pressed the Obama administration to leave new regulations to the states.

"Despite the renaissance on state and private lands, energy production on federal lands has fallen, and this rule is just one more barrier to growth," said Erik Milito, director of industry operations for the American Petroleum Institute. "A duplicative layer of new federal regulation is unnecessary."

The Interior Department has spent more than three years developing the rules, in close consultation with oil and gas companies, states and environmental groups. The agency also said it has reviewed more than 1.5 million public comments.

Friday's regulations are expected to be the first in a series of new rules governing fracking safety — the Obama administration is also expected to issue rules designed to curb the release of methane, a planet-warming greenhouse gas, from fracking wells.