

EPA advisory panel weighs expansion of fracking study

Katie Howell, Environment & Energy Publishing, 4-7-10

U.S. EPA may broaden its pending study on the effects of hydraulic fracturing on water supplies to include other environmental and health effects, according to agency documents and members of a science advisory panel guiding the research.

Meeting today in Washington, D.C., members of the Science Advisory Board Environmental Engineering Committee said EPA should conduct a full life-cycle analysis of the oil and gas production technique as part of its study.

"I don't think this study should only be about drinking water," said panel member Arpad Horvath, an engineering professor at the University of California, Berkeley. "In the spirit of the life-cycle analysis, it should not ignore other environmental and human health assessments. It should be looking at human health effects, water resource effects, air quality."

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, blasts water, chemicals and sand or plastic beads into wellbores to break apart rocks and release trapped hydrocarbons. In use for some 60 years, the technology has come under fire recently from environmentalists and lawmakers as fracking has become a key factor in unlocking vast new shale gas plays.

Congress ordered the EPA study in the fiscal 2010 appropriations legislation. The advisory panel is meeting this week to develop study recommendations for EPA's Office of Research and Development. The study is expected to be completed in 2012.

"Congress' charge to EPA ... is broad," said Craig Segall, an attorney with the Sierra Club. "This relationship necessarily encompasses the entire life cycle of the fracking process, from the hydrogeology of the proposed well site to the treatment and management of produced water to the long-term effects of abandoned wells and the fluids left behind within them."

But the industry urged EPA not to exceed its congressional mandate.

"Halliburton believes that the scope of the study as outlined in the scoping materials significantly exceeds EPA's mandate," said Mike Watts, director of fracture-stimulation affairs for Halliburton Energy Services. "The scoping materials have suggested that the agency has identified issues and potential research questions that go well beyond the impacts to drinking water, and in some cases, have raised points that are not even related to hydraulic fracturing operations."

"Expanding the scope of the study as proposed," Watts added, "will prolong the study and not contribute to addressing the central issue as defined by Congress."

Lee Fuller, vice president of government relations at the Independent Petroleum Association of America, noted that many of the potential study issues raised in the draft scoping documents are practices that would occur in any oil and gas operation whether fracking was being conducted or not.

"Water removal is something we do whether we're fracking or not," Fuller said. "Constructing drilling sites

happens whether we're fracking or not; managing drilling fluids happens whether we're fracking or not; the occurrence of water with gas happens whether we're fracking or not."

And some members of the panel seemed to take heed of the notion.

"It would be prudent to keep in mind," Horvath said, "what is a fracturing question and what is a general oil and gas question."