

EPA begins study of fracturing's effects on water supplies

Katie Howell, Environment & Energy Publishing, 3-18-10

U.S. EPA announced the start today of a study examining the effects of a controversial oil and gas production technique known as hydraulic fracturing on water supplies.

"Our research will be designed to answer questions about the potential impact of hydraulic fracturing on human health and the environment," EPA Assistant Administrator Paul Anastas said in a statement. "The study will be conducted through a transparent, peer-reviewed process, with significant stakeholder input."

Hydraulic fracturing is a decades-old technology used by the petroleum industry to improve production at aging wells by blasting water, chemicals and sand or plastic beads into a wellbore at high pressure. The technique has grabbed public attention as the industry has used it to tap vast stores of domestic natural gas, and drillers have poured into Pennsylvania and New York to tap the potentially vast Marcellus Shale formation.

"Understanding the risks that hydraulic fracturing poses to drinking water supplies is critical to guiding future policies and regulations that will safeguard the public," Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.) said in a statement heralding the study's launch.

Hinchey pushed for the congressionally authorized EPA study and has also been a key player on a bill (H.R. 2766) that would mandate federal regulation of fracturing under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

The new study is being praised by environmentalists who criticized a 2004 EPA probe whose results were skewed, they say, by data collected selectively from sources with a vested interest in the oil and gas industry.

"Independent, unbiased scientific inquiry into hydraulic fracturing is critical," said Amy Mall, a senior policy analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "We are very pleased that the EPA is responding to families across the country who are concerned that oil and gas development is contaminating their drinking water."

Industry also welcomed the new study, saying it would prove claims that fracturing technology is safe.

"Assuming the study's methodology is technically sound, its evaluations are science-based, and its conclusions are peer-reviewed, there's really only one credible outcome this project can produce," said Chris Tucker, a spokesman for the industry-backed group Energy in Depth. "And -- spoiler alert -- it's not the one that opponents of responsible shale gas exploration are clamoring for."

The American Petroleum Institute and America's Natural Gas Alliance likewise expressed confidence the study would pacify critics of fracturing.

"We expect the study to confirm what 60 years of experience and investigation have already demonstrated: that hydraulic fracturing is a safe and well understood technology for producing oil and natural gas," API said in a statement.

The trade group added, "While the technology has been used for more than a half century, its continued use is crucial. It is enabling access to massive new supplies of natural gas trapped in shale formations across the United States."

EPA's new study will get a start with \$1.9 million in funding and will be designed by the agency's Office of

Research and Development and guided by the EPA science advisory board.

House Energy and Commerce Committee Democrats are continuing with their probe into chemicals used by hydraulic fracturing companies. Meanwhile, H.R. 2766 and Senate companion legislation (S. 1215) that would require federal regulation of fracturing are languishing.

"While we eagerly await the results [of the EPA study], we also think there is sufficient information for Congress to move ahead to protect drinking water by closing the Halliburton loophole and ensuring that hydraulic fracturing is regulated under the Safe Drinking Water Act," NRDC's Mall said.