

Companies scrambling for non-toxic 'fracking' alternatives

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Natural gas companies are investing in environmentally conscious alternatives to hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," as political pressure heats up to find other ways to access valuable gas shales.

As fracking has become more widely used to unlock massive gas reserves across the nation, concerns have grown that the technique, which injects millions of gallons of water, sand and chemicals into gas-bearing shale, may also contaminate the water table in the process.

Now fracking is under investigation by a U.S. House committee, and some congressional Democrats have called for tighter regulation of the process. Though natural gas producers say the technique has never been conclusively linked to water contamination, worries expressed by residents of gas-producing areas and environmental groups threaten to slow development of the massive Marcellus Shale gas field in New York and Pennsylvania.

So companies including Devon Energy Corp., Southwestern Energy Co. and Newfield Exploration Co. are exploring ways to recycle waste water, use nontoxic chemicals for drilling and eliminate the need for some chemicals altogether.

Even major oilfield service leaders like Baker Hughes Inc. and Schlumberger Ltd. are trying out environmentally friendly chemicals that were initially developed for offshore drilling. Halliburton Co., too, is employing ultraviolet light to kill bacteria, potentially eliminating the need for toxic chemicals.

The market for such products is also attracting interest from deep-pocketed investors including Drew Bledsoe, who was the former quarterback for the former New England Patriots and other teams. He and his partners -- including Troy Aikman, the former Dallas Cowboys quarterback -- have invested \$10 million in a Stuart, Fla.-based company that claims it can eliminate the need for antibacterial chemicals by killing bacteria at the surface before water is injected into wells. The company, Ecosphere, is working on ways that gas producers can recycle the waste water used in fracking instead of shipping it to a treatment site or disposal.