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County watershed under watch

October 21, 2010 - By **DAVID THOMPSON** dthompson@sungazette.com

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To identify natural gas industry impacts on local fresh water supplies, it is important to determine the existing - or "baseline" - conditions of those supplies before the industry ramps up, said Walter A. Nicholson, acting executive director of the Williamsport Municipal Water Authority.

The authority recently approved an agreement with the U.S. Geological Survey to begin monitoring water quality in the Lycoming Creek watershed.

The program will allow the current condition of the watershed to be assessed so impacts associated with the gas industry may be distinguished from natural conditions or man-made impacts not associated with the gas industry, said Nicholson.

It will enable data to be gathered showing the chemical makeup of the water over the changing seasons and periods of high and low flows, he said.

"We want to do our due diligence relative to the existing conditions of select streams and aquifers of the Lycoming Creek watershed. The goal of the study is to document the existing quality of the aquifer and streams to develop tools to be able to distinguish existing natural (conditions) and impacts such as abandoned mine drainage, agriculture and road de-icing from these newer potential contaminants," Nicholson said.

Lycoming Creek is of vital importance to the City of Williamsport's public water supply because it is a major source for recharging the authority's water well field, which recently underwent a \$15 million upgrade, Nicholson said.

Nicholson said the authority also takes water from two area streams - Mosquito Creek and Hagerman's Run.

In spite of the fact that the lower portion of Lycoming Creek has been impacted by agriculture, runoff from roads and increasing commercial and residential development, it remains a high quality stream, Nicholson said.

That is because much of the upper reaches of the stream flows through mountains and forestland, which increases the quality of the water.

"It is in that forested area that we are going to see a significant increase in (gas drilling) activity," Nicholson said.

More than 40 well drilling permits have been issued in the watershed, he said.

"We anticipate in the next several years, there will be hundreds of permits issued there," he added.

There have already been reports of spills and other accidents related to the gas industry, Nicholson said. Even if the number of incidences remain small relative to the number of wells drilled, there still could be serious environmental problems as a result of the sheer volume of activity, he said.

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"If you only have 100 wells and you have problems with 1 percent of them, that's only one problem. If you have 10,000 wells, that's 100 times more problems at the same (incident rate)," Nicholson said. "One percent of a small number is a small number, but one percent of a huge number is a lot."

The plan is to get well field water samples this fall, then install monitoring stations at 30 locations next June through August, Nicholson said.

It is hoped the information gathered through the program can be shared with agencies charged with protecting water resources, he said.

Nicholson said the authority partnered with the USGS because of the agency's expertise.

"We're dealing with a first-class scientific organization with 125 years of experience doing this kind of work," he said.

The agreement calls for the authority to pay \$75,000 of the \$139,000 cost of the program, Nicholson said. The USGS will cover the remaining cost, he said.

The cost of the program is one of the examples of the financial burden Marcellus Shale development is placing on local communities and the need for a "user fee" to offset the costs of monitoring and enforcement by state agencies, Nicholson said.

"In a more perfect world, it would probably be the state (Department of Environmental Protection) contracting with USGS," Nicholson said. The industry turned down a request to provide funding for the program, he said.

The Susquehanna River Basin Commission, which regulates water quantity issues in the basin, has implemented a monitoring program mostly in areas of the basin where gas development is anticipated, according to Andrew Gavin, commission manager of restoration and protection.

"We're targeting areas where there is active drilling, but also select small streams where there is no activity to give us a reference point in undisturbed areas not affected by drilling," he said.

The program was launched due to increasing demands by the industry for water withdrawals in the basin, plus anticipated increases in wastewater flows associated with the industry.

The commission plans to have 50 monitoring stations equipped with sensitive data collection technology installed in the upper basin in New York and Pennsylvania by next June, Gavin said. There are 25 monitoring stations installed and in operation now, Gavin said.

Another five stations are to be installed in Pennsylvania in the next four to six months, another 10 in New York state in the next month and 10 on state forestland leased to the gas industry by the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

The solar powered stations collect data and transmit it to the SRBC website, which may be accessed by the public.

Like the Williamsport authority-USGS program, the commission program is designed to gather data on current conditions in the watershed so that significant changes may be identified.

"Before we can really be comfortable with recognizing departures from natural conditions, you have to understand normal conditions throughout the seasons and flow ranges," Gavin said.

The gas industry has funded a portion of the SRBC project, Gavin said. East Resources donated \$750,000 for the project, while the commission dedicated \$250,000 for it, he said. The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority and Pennsylvania DCNR have each provided \$200,000, he said.

The SRBC program focuses on five water quality parameters: temperature, pH, conductance, dissolved oxygen and turbidity, Gavin said. The parameters alone will not indicate stream health, but could act as a warning that conditions may warrant additional testing, he said.

For example, an increase in conductivity - a stream's ability to conduct electricity - could indicate an increase in total dissolved solids, or salts, associated with a gas industry wastewater spill, he said.

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