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EPA considers using Dimock, Pa. for case study

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When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency came to Binghamton last year for two days of hearings on hydraulic fracturing, it was looking for suggestions on where to do a case study.

The response heard over and over? Dimock, Pa., the tiny township in Susquehanna County where state officials say faulty gas drilling operations led to 18 methane-contaminated water wells and a community divided.

Those voices were apparently heard.

EPA officials have been in contact with some Dimock landowners, and an agency spokeswoman confirmed the once-sleepy hamlet that has gained national attention is under consideration to be a part of a \$1.9 million study which is expected to last at least two years.

"We received many nominations for case studies," said Betsaida Alcantara, the EPA spokeswoman. "We are evaluating the nominations, including Dimock, to determine which of them we will undertake as case studies."

Last year, the EPA launched a study on fracking – a gas-stimulation technique that involves the use of a high-pressure mix of water, sand and chemicals blasted deep underground – and its possible effect on groundwater.

Supporters of the process say it's safe and crucial for extracting massive amounts of gas from shale formations. Critics say it could wreak havoc on the environment and taint water.

Robert Puls, director of research for the EPA's Ground Water and Ecosystems Restoration Division, met a month ago with a number of Dimock homeowners whose water wells had been contaminated with high levels of methane, according to Victoria Switzer, a resident who took part in the meeting.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection has held Cabot Oil & Gas Corp. responsible for the contamination, but the company has denied responsibility, instead opting to settle with the department to end nearly two years of legal wrangling.

Switzer is one of about a dozen Dimock residents who have sued Cabot for damages, claiming their drilling operations led to their ruined water wells.

"(Puls) met with us and asked us if we would be interested in the possibility of a being a case study," Switzer said. "It would be great. To me, my goal has always been to protect my home and my land. I now know that the DEP isn't going to do that, and Cabot certainly isn't going to do that. I'm hopeful, and maybe I'm naïve, that the EPA can help us if they take us as a case study."

Cabot spokesman George Stark said the company would be more than willing to cooperate with the EPA.

"Cabot Oil & Gas Corporation will participate in a fact-based hydraulic fracturing study regarding any locality where it currently operates," Stark said. "It is Cabot's opinion that too much misinformation exists today regarding hydraulic fracturing. Studies aimed at collecting valid facts and evidence

regarding hydraulic fracture technologies, operations and practices are welcome."

Dimock was the overwhelming choice of speakers at the September hearings at the Forum. Some from environmental groups pointed to the site as an example of the consequences of natural gas drilling, while landowners and industry representatives asked the agency to investigate the site and dispel myths.

If the township is going to be included in the EPA study, it may be contingent on how wide of a scope the agency takes.

A directive from Congress that kick-started the study asked the agency to look at the relationship between hydrofracking and groundwater. Many at the public hearings, however, urged it to take a wider approach, including all of the drilling activities that take place before and after the fracking process.

The DEP concluded the Dimock water well contamination was caused by faulty well casing and drilling operations and not the hydrofracking process, though a spill of a fracking solution made its way to a local stream.

"Should the community of Dimock be chosen as a community to be studied, Cabot notes for the record that the (Pennsylvania DEP) has stated that Dimock does not have a hydraulic fracturing issue," Stark said.

Switzer said she's hopeful the EPA will include Dimock, calling the agency her "last hope."

"We're waiting. I don't have any assurances that they're going to do it, but I'm in prayer mode," Switzer said. "I'm hopeful that if EPA were involved, that they would gain from the experience. I don't have anywhere else to go. They're our last chance."
