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[Home](#) > Chris Tucker: EPA is a no-show in Texas fracking case

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Comments (1)

Imagine for a moment that you've been tasked with conducting a scientific analysis to determine the origination point for small volumes of methane detected in two private water wells in Parker Co., Texas.

You would know the question is important, since the agency for which you work – the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency - has based nearly its entire case against an energy producer in North Texas on the assertion that the methane in those water wells came from natural gas wells drilled into the Barnett Shale.

In conducting this analysis, it's likely you'd know that one of the most obvious ways to characterize the methane in the water wells is to run a profile on the percentage of nitrogen found in the samples of natural gas.

Through experience, you would know that methane in the Barnett has a relatively low percentage of nitrogen – often in the single digits.

And you would also know that a much shallower rock formation called the Strawn has a much higher percentage, generally around 20 percent.

Your task: Pin the presence of methane on Range Resources by trying to prove its wells in the Barnett represent the source of the natural gas in the water wells.

On Dec. 7, 2010, that's precisely the argument that EPA put forth in issuing an unprecedented "emergency order" -- demanding, among other things, that Range plug up its wells and go home.

Just one problem: The isotopic analysis EPA used as the basis for its order doesn't include a word about nitrogen; EPA never ran those tests.

Fortunately, experts from Weatherford Labs in Texas did. And at a hearing of the Texas Railroad Commission in Austin this week, those experts testified that the methane found in those private water wells in question came from the Strawn, not the Barnett.

What that means in practical geological terms is that Range isn't (and in fact couldn't be) responsible for the occurrence of methane in those wells – it has no wells in the Strawn.

What it means in practical political terms is that EPA's analysis and subsequent actions were, are and continue to be wrong – or at least “fundamentally flawed,” according to testimony from Weatherford expert Dr. Mark McCaffrey.

Of course, EPA itself didn't have a whole lot to say about that or anything else this week. It didn't show for the hearing. Nor did it submit even a single page of data or testimony in support of its case.

In fairness, it's a case that's becoming increasingly difficult to make, at least with a straight-face.

With its isotopic analysis now exposed as incomplete, the only card EPA has left in the deck is to assert that methane migration into Parker Co. wells is an entirely new phenomenon, something that started happening only after Range began drilling wells into the Barnett over the past couple years.

But Bob Patterson of the Upper Trinity Groundwater Conservation District -- someone who, it can be presumed, knows a thing or two about the quality, composition and history of groundwater in the area – told Platts earlier this month that natural gas has been in the water “at least since the late '60s or early '70s.”

A 2003 report by independent water experts -- re-introduced at the hearing -- confirms that fact. Of course, because EPA decided not to show this week, we can't say for certain whether the agency even knows about it. The report, or Bob.

Remarkably, even as its case (and credibility) continues to erode, EPA this week asked the Department of Justice to impose a \$16,500-a-day penalty on Range for failing to comply with an order that EPA itself has neither the interest nor ability to defend or explain in an open, on-the-record forum.

Presumably, the agency won't be able to hide on this forever. But then again, with this many holes in their case, could you blame them for trying?

Chris Tucker is spokesman and team lead for Energy In Depth. Visit EID's Twitter page for live updates from the Range hearing, and EID's blog for a comprehensive round-up of documents and exhibits relevant to the case.

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