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Expanded gas well info available online from DEP

BY DAVID FALCHEK (STAFF WRITER)

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Marcellus Shale

Complete coverage of natural gas drilling in Northeast Pennsylvania including recently updated searchable database of natural gas drilling leases for Lackawanna, Luzerne and Wyoming Counties

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The state Department of Environmental Protection unveiled Monday a new tool to make gas well information accessible in a few mouse clicks.

The Oil and Gas Electronic Reporting website allows members of the public to obtain well information by permit number, operator ID or by county. Data ranging from well production and wastewater to violations also can be downloaded.

DEP spokeswoman Jamie Legenos said the department wants to create greater transparency between the public and the oil and gas industry.

"This will assist landowners and policymakers to make informed decisions," she said. "We also hope this offers an incentive to the industry to update procedures."

The tool is a big change. Samantha L. Malone of the University of Pittsburgh Center for Healthy Environments & Communities said the new tool removes a barrier to citizens trying to get information about well activity. Even researchers had a hard time finding data, she said. Her group created fracktracker.org, a blog and data tool that sought to make data on Marcellus Shale drilling more accessible and understandable.

Those interested in getting public information about a well in their neighborhood, for example, used to need internal information, such as a permit number, she said. Violations often were not associated with the well or permit number or a specific well.

The gas exploration industry is pleased with the site as well. It helps insulate them from accusations that they are keeping information from the public, industry leaders said.

Violations also are more detailed. Once, violations were often maintained under broad categories that gave few or no details about the violation. The public had to request an in-person file review to see the violation reports. The new site makes available violation spreadsheets that include inspectors' notes, which often include details about the type and severity of the violation.

Kathryn Klaber of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, an industry trade group, said her group supported the legislation that led to the higher-level reporting. She said the data, particularly the production data, is also a valuable planning tool for the industry. Beyond that, she said the transparency also may increase the level of trust between the public and the industry.

The site makes available a 12-month Marcellus production reporting period from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010. Beginning February 2011, reporting periods will cover the previous six-month period.

To check out the new site, visit www.marcellusreporting.state.pa.us/ogreports.

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