

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Gas boom creates need for inspectors

By Joe Napsha

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Wednesday, November 3, 2010

More inspectors are needed to oversee the state's oil and natural gas industries because of the boom in exploration and production of natural gas from the Marcellus shale reserves, the state's environmental agency chief said Tuesday in Pittsburgh.

Although the Department of Environmental Protection increased its inspectors from 88 to 212 during the past two years, more are needed to cover the burgeoning gas industry, DEP Secretary John Hanger told more than 200 people at a natural gas industry conference in the Westin Convention Center, Downtown.

Rather than cut inspectors as other energy-producing states have done, Pennsylvania is the only state to expand its inspection staff during the recession, Hanger said.

"We're trying to grow the agency with the (oil and gas) industry," Hanger said.

Many gas producers in Pennsylvania are following the various regulations designed to protect the environment and to ensure safe operations, Hanger said, but he said "there are business pressures" that may lead some to cut corners to cut costs.

"It's cheaper to dump wastewater (from a drilling operation), than treat it. The shortcuts and cheapest route ... can't be allowed to become a significant means of doing business," said Hanger, adding that such practices would turn the public against the industry and harm its image.

Between January 2008 and June 30, the state has cited 1,400 violations, Hanger said. If the only companies exploring for gas in the state were those that followed the best drilling practices, that number would have been reduced to about 300, Hanger said.

In August, the state implemented new wastewater discharge standards for all industrial users, which prohibit dumping drilling water into the state's waterways. The rules originally were scheduled to go into effect Jan. 1, 2011. Drilling water contains high levels of salts and heavy metals, and discharging it into a river -- as had been the practice for decades -- resulted in polluted drinking water, Hanger noted.

Further changes in the wastewater standards would have to go through a regulatory review process, said John W. Ubinger Jr., senior vice president of

the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, South Side. That would include public hearings, approval by the environment committees of the state Senate and House, plus the Independent Regulatory Review Commission, Ubinger said.

The stricter state wastewater standards have resulted in an increase in business for companies that treat drilling wastewater, said Daniel Ertel, managing partner of Eureka Resources Inc., Williamsport. The treatment costs about \$5 to \$6 per barrel of wastewater, Ertel said.

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