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Gas company changes drilling process

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One of Somerset County's main Marcellus Shale stakeholders is pledging to discontinue its use of open ponds for contaminated drilling water.

In a statement Nov. 16 Chief Oil & Gas, of Dallas, announced it will change to a "closed loop" process for all of its natural gas wells.

"It was pretty clear that the (Department of Environmental Protection) in Pennsylvania and other states felt it was the preferred method," said Chief spokeswoman Kristi Gittins. "So it was an easy decision."

In closed loop operations water used for the hydraulic fracturing drilling phase is piped directly into steel containers. Each Marcellus Shale natural gas well requires a few million gallons of water in hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking." The water is contaminated by chemicals used in drilling.

Environmental groups have been critical of the alternative to closed loop, which is to store water in open-air, plastic-lined ponds.

Gittins cited the switch to closed loop as an example of how the company has tweaked its operations to address public concern.

"It's a learning process," Gittins said. "We want people to feel good about how we do this."

Somerset Conservation District watershed specialist Dave Kemp called the switch to closed loop "a big deal." He said the process should help the company reduce its need for water by carting the metal retainers from site to site for reuse.

"Their ultimate goal, in talking to the industry, is (to not use much) water," Kemp said.

"This is a great environmental benefit, too," he added. "I'm sure this will alleviate a lot of their concerns for polluting the environment."

According to Kemp, closed loop is a safer alternative to open ponds.

"The liners might become damaged or cracked and (contaminated fluids) could leach into the shallow ground water aquifers," Kemp said.

Danielle Boston — director of public outreach for the Pennsylvania Independent Oil & Gas Association — said the switch may prompt other drilling companies to adopt the closed loop practice.

Her organization consists of approximately 850 member companies, including nearly 200 drilling firms.

“I do feel Chief is a leader in this,” Boston said. “I’m interested to see how many also adopt this drilling process.”

There are fewer than 10 active Marcellus Shale natural gas wells in Somerset County, but most experts predict big increases in drilling activity throughout the state over the next several years.

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