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Gas drillers must adhere to new rules

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Published: October 15, 2010

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HARRISBURG - Natural gas drillers will have to use stronger cement in wells and publicly disclose more information about chemicals used in fracking fluids under a rule approved Tuesday by a state board.

The well-construction rule approved 20-1 by the Environmental Quality Board aims to prevent gas from migrating into water supplies as a result of drilling operations and establishing notification procedures in the event of spills or water-pollution problems.

The rule is one of several being implemented by the Department of Environmental Protection in response to the drilling boom under way in the Marcellus Shale. But key well-casing provisions would apply also to established shallow-gas wells in Northwest Pennsylvania.

DEP first proposed the well rule last year, but it added requirements in the wake of a well blowout in June in Clearfield County. The focus on preventing gas migration gained priority after the well-publicized contamination of drinking water wells in Dimock Township, Susquehanna County, due to faulty or overpressurized casing in Marcellus Shale wells.

Key provisions would:

- Require greater use of well blowout prevention equipment.
- Require drillers to report water pollution or water-loss problems within 24 hours instead of by the current 10 days.
- Require drillers to publicly disclose chemicals, chemical additives, volume of fluids and sources of water and recycled water used in hydraulic fracturing operations. Drillers can designate some information such as the concentration of chemicals as proprietary trade secrets. In that case, public release of that information would be governed by the state right-to-know law, DEP officials said.
- Contain new requirements for driller notification in the event of gas-migration problems.
- Set guidelines for exploration of deeper gas deposits in the Onondaga and Utica formations.

"These rules now are as strong as any in the country," said DEP Secretary John Hanger, who predicted that gas-migration problems will decline as a result.

However, the Environmental Defense Fund, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that works on environmental issues, said the rules would be stronger if they were to include four proposals it suggested. These include more monitoring of the pressure between a well casing and rock formation, a requirement to keep well-cementing records on permanent file instead of just five years, giving DEP authority to take the lead in investigating well problems and a clearer definition of protected water supplies.

The well-construction rule now faces review by the House and Senate environmental resources committees and a final vote by the Independent Regulatory Review Commission before it takes effect.

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