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Gas industry urged to act soon on drilling rules

By Andrew Maykuth

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On the heels of penalizing one natural gas operator \$240,000 for contaminating water wells, Pennsylvania's top environmental official Thursday urged the industry to immediately adopt proposed new drilling standards rather than waiting for them to be formally enacted.

John Hanger, secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection, summoned industry representatives to Harrisburg to discuss new construction standards for wells drilled to tap natural gas reserves. The new guidelines are designed to reduce the chance of incidents such as the one that has contaminated 14 water wells in the Susquehanna County town of Dimock.

"I made it clear that this industry needs to have world-class standards, deploy the best practices possible, and needed to reach excellence in environmental protection and safety," Hanger said in an interview after meeting with about 100 representatives of companies drilling for gas in the Marcellus Shale formation.

Hanger encountered little resistance to the new standards, which set stricter casing and cementing requirements for gas wells and require operators to test those gas wells quarterly for leaks. "I'm not aware of a company in the industry that objects to the strengthening of the standards," he said.

Hanger last month issued a tartly worded invitation to Thursday's meeting after fining Cabot Oil & Gas Corp. and ordering it to plug three wells that he blamed for contaminating drinking-water supplies in Dimock. The invitation had the tone of a regulatory call to the woodshed.

But participants at the meeting described the tone as positive and said that neither Dimock nor Cabot was mentioned by name.

"The industry is fully supportive of the proposal," said Kathryn Klaber, executive director of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, an industry trade group.

Hanger said the industry had worked closely with DEP to devise stricter well standards, whose chief purpose is to prevent natural gas from migrating into freshwater aquifers. DEP said it believed that natural gas from a shallow formation migrated alongside the steel casing that transports gas from the deep Marcellus formation to the surface.

The new standards call for improved cementing to seal any voids that provide pathways for stray gas to migrate into groundwater.


"As we have seen in Dimock, stray gas migrating from improperly constructed wells can build up to explosive levels near and inside homes and can make residential water supplies unusable," Hanger said.

The new regulations will be presented to the Environmental Quality Board on Monday, and Hanger said they would be enacted later in the year. He called upon the industry to embrace the standards immediately.

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