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Gov. Hoeven tells EPA that N.D. can handle fracturing

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By REBECCA BEITSCH Bismarck Tribune | Posted: Sunday, May 16, 2010 2:00 am | (9) Comments

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Gov. John Hoeven has had a series of meetings with Environmental Protection Agency leaders as the agency moves forward with a process that could end in its regulation of an oil drilling process known as fracturing.

The EPA is now studying the effect the process has on ground and drinking water and could potentially use the authority granted in the Clean Water Act to take over the permitting process from the states.

Fracturing, or “fracking,” involves pumping water and sand at high pressures to two miles beneath the surface using a series of pipes. The microseismic stimulations from the process loosen up oil tucked into crevices of the Bakken formation. But the concern lies in both in the process’ interaction with groundwater and what happens to the wastewater once the process is completed.

The message Hoeven wants to send to the EPA is “we can regulate fracturing very well, thank you very much.”

The state has submitted, for review by the EPA, its standards for the fracturing process, which includes regulations on the construction of the well to ensure it can withstand the pressure, as well as how to dispose of the wastewater once the process is completed.

Lynn Helms, director of the Department of Mineral Resources, said he is opposed to the potential regulations, not because they would drastically change the process, but rather because he believes drilling through fracking would have to be abandoned until the new regulations were in place.

“I don’t expect more stringent rules, but I do expect a two- to three-year stoppage in North Dakota while the rules get put in place, and that’s a lot of unemployed people,” Helms said.

While the state assures that its methods are environmentally secure, some believe the topic has not been thoroughly researched enough.

“Not enough is known about the environmental impacts, so it seems prudent that we take time for research and take a go slow approach,” said Wayde Schafer of the Sierra Club.

Citing environmental problems in other states with a shallow water table, Donny Nelson, with the Western Organization of Resource Councils, said North Dakota isn’t doing enough to regulate the process and said the water-based solution used in fracking may contain other hazardous materials.

“I’m concerned about the amount of water that’s used and where they get it from. I’m concerned about what’s in that water they’re pumping into the ground. I’m concerned about the long-term effects on the aquifer and the chance that it could contaminate our water sources or ground water,” Nelson said.

Helms said fracking is environmentally sound because of all the safeguards in place.

While the original drill space is over a foot wide, the steel casing and protective cement that create a barrier between the fracking process on the earth reduces the diameter to a roughly 3-inch hole for oil to flow out of.

The actual oil removing process takes place “50 feet below the deepest groundwater source in North Dakota,” Helms said.

The wastewater and sand that comes up is placed in a clay pit in the ground, which is covered with an impermeable layer of rubber. Once oil comes out of the ground, the entire mixture must be held in an above ground tank.

“We don’t allow oil in the pit, because that would create a whole magnitude of problems,” Helms said.

In addressing Nelson’s concern about additives to the water, Helms said it can include the same clay that’s used in coffee cups, the same thickener used in cosmetics, and some chemicals that also are used in medication, household cleaners, antifreeze and various food products — all of which, he said, are unable to make it into the drinking supply.

Helms said the fracking infrastructure undergo a number of tests to make sure they can withstand the pressure of the process.

As for the amount of ground water used, Bob Shaver, the director of the water appropriation division for the state water commission, said undergroundwater sources aren’t sufficient for oil production.

“Our major concern is groundwater sources in the western part of the state will not be adequate for the estimated annual demand,” Shaver said.

Shaver said that with estimates of 1,800 new wells next year, each using 4 million gallons of water, 22,100 acre feet of water would be needed.

“I do know, this is a fact, that our groundwater supply will not be able to meet that need,” he said.

The answer, Shaver said, lies in Lake Sakakawea, where more than 40,000 acre feet are flowing per day, of which, about 60 acre feet would be needed for oil production.

“That’s about three-tenths of 1 percent,” Shaver said. “Lake Sakakawea will easily handle that demand.”

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