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EPA to study whether fracking poses water risk

By TOM FOWLER Houston Chronicle

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will do a detailed study of hydraulic fracturing, the technique used to extract natural gas from dense shale formations, to determine whether it poses risks to surface and ground water.

The study has been expected for some time but the EPA formally announced its plans today, saying it has \$1.9 million set aside for the study this year with more funds possible next year.

"Our research will be designed to answer questions about the potential impact of hydraulic fracturing on human health and the environment," said Dr. Paul T. Anastas, assistant administrator for the EPA's Office of Research and Development in a statement. "The study will be conducted through a transparent, peer-reviewed process, with significant stakeholder input."

Hydraulic fracturing involves drilling into a formation and injecting water mixed with sand and chemicals under high pressure. The mixture cracks open the shale while the sand holds open the fractures, allowing the natural gas to flow more freely to the surface.

The chemicals make up a small part of the overall mix — less than 0.5 percent by volume — but often include hazardous substances such as acids and compounds found in cleaners and antifreeze.



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While fracturing has been used for decades, concerns about its environmental effects have risen in recent years as its use has spread to Eastern states — where exploration has been limited in the past — and to more populated areas in the West.

In a number of communities from Pennsylvania to Colorado and Wyoming, some landowners near gas drilling operations say their drinking water has been contaminated by fracturing fluids or natural gas.

Industry leaders insist no instances of ground water contamination have been linked conclusively to the fracturing process, and that the EPA study will reaffirm their belief. They note that the gas formations are typically hundreds of feet below drinking water aquifers and that it's in the industry's best interest to be a good neighbor.

"We expect the study to confirm what 60 years of experience and investigation have already demonstrated: that hydraulic fracturing is a safe and well understood technology for producing oil and natural gas," the American Petroleum Institute said in a statement.

Environmental groups also said they're glad to see the EPA moving forward with the study. The EPA issued a report in 2004 saying fracturing isn't a threat to drinking water, but some groups have said that study was biased by the Bush administration's tight relationship with the

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energy industry.

Lauren Pagel, policy director for the Earthworks Oil and Gas Accountability Project, said she hopes this EPA study looks at the entire oil and gas drilling life cycle and not just the injection of fluids into the ground.

A number of the water contamination claims around the country are linked to surface spills of fracturing fluids or possibly defective well construction that allowed natural gas or drilling fluids to leak into water supplies.

"We're not opposed to oil and gas drilling by any stretch of the imagination, but it needs to be done right," Pagel said. "I think we all know in every industry there are good actors, who live up to the letter and the spirit of the law, and bad actors who don't."

Hydraulic fracturing is not subject to federal drinking water laws but is regulated by state laws. The disposal and storage of all water and fracturing fluids that come back out of a gas well — called produced water — is covered by federal law.

The House Energy and Commerce Committee started its own investigation of hydraulic fracturing last month, saying it asked for and received data about the process from several companies involved in fracturing jobs, including Halliburton, BJ Services and Schlumberger.

So far that investigation seems to have focused on the use of diesel in fracturing fluids.

Rep. Gene Green, D-Texas, a member of the committee, said he supports the EPA's "commitment for a science-based, peer-reviewed and transparent study on hydraulic

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fracturing." Green also said it would be premature for Congress or the administration to consider legislation or regulation affecting hydraulic fracturing until the study is complete.

The proposed legislation Green referred to, known as the "Frac Act," would require drilling companies to apply for fracturing permits and reveal the contents of the fluids they use.

A spokesman for one of the bill sponsors, Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y., said the congressman is pleased with the study but will continue to push the bill forward.

The EPA is still determining the scope of the study and will discuss its design in meetings of its science advisory board on April 7 and 8 in Washington. The study will likely take several months.

Jennifer Dlouhy contributed from Washington.

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