

In support of fracking: things we need to know

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Hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling have transformed the U.S. gas industry from a declining resource to a vast and vibrant source of domestic energy and jobs. Yet it has also brought new environmental concerns about air pollution and noise from the many heavy trucks and power sources needed to fracture the rock thousands of feet below the earth; drinking **water contamination** from spills and poor casing and cementing techniques; methane migration to **water wells**; the use of billions of gallons of fresh water in the fracturing process; and the safe disposal of billions of gallons of flowback water after the rock has been fractured.

Last year, the **EPA** announced that it would conduct a comprehensive study of natural gas fracturing and its environmental impacts. Last week, the EPA released its draft plan for this life-cycle study. This draft plan is open for public comment before it is

reviewed by a scientific advisory board in early March. The planned study has been welcomed by some in industry, such as the executive director of the industry-supported **Marcellus Shale** Coalition in the Pennsylvania area, as an important educational resource for the public. In her view, the industry has fractured thousands of wells with little environmental impact and has nothing to hide, especially when state regulators, such as those in Pennsylvania, have strengthened well casing and other standards, using federal, state and local laws to do so.

However, some in industry continue to react intemperately to any such EPA study, suggesting that the EPA has been goaded into this study by environmental groups and junk science. These spokesmen point to a 2004 EPA study that found no confirmed instances of drinking water contamination by frack fluids. And they accuse the EPA of somehow ambushing industry when the EPA recently posted an announcement on its website that the use of diesel in frack fluids was not exempt under a 2005 Congressional law.

Let's look at these two items. The 2004 EPA study covered fracking in certain coalbed methane reservoirs in the West. It documented instances of dangerous levels of methane and hydrogen sulfide in homes and crawl spaces, gas bubbles in wells and streams, odors and poor air quality, but concluded that injection of frack fluids into coalbed methane wells appeared to pose little threat to underground drinking water supplies. In 2009, the EPA investigated water wells in the heavily drilled area of Pavillion, in Wyoming. It found that more than 25 percent of the tested wells had drinking water contamination following gas development, including a pollutant found in frack fluids called 2-butoxyethanol that has been linked to an increased risk of cancer. Another 2008 study found that gas drilling was highly correlated with degraded water in dozens of wells in **Garfield County, Colorado**.

These studies focused on coalbed methane reservoirs, not **shale gas** reservoirs like the Marcellus and many others now being developed. And they looked largely at drinking water, not other environmental impacts. It would seem wise to conduct a broader study of these quite different types of reservoirs rather than harking back to a stale 2004 EPA study.

Now let's look at diesel and frack fluids. In 2005, Congress enacted section 322 of the Energy Policy Act, which exempted certain fracturing fluids from the **Safe Drinking Water Act** (SDWA). The law reads: "The term 'underground injection' ... excludes the underground injection of fluids or propping agents (other than diesel fuels) pursuant to hydraulic fracturing operations related to oil [or] gas wells" from the SWDA. It is hard to make a law more clear: diesel fuel used in fracturing is specifically not excluded from regulation under the SWDA. Yet a Congressional committee found last month that millions of gallons of fracturing fluids with diesel were used by the industry between 2005 and 2008. Why do some in industry think that EPA's current enforcement of the 2005 statutory ban on the use of diesel is somehow an ambush or an illegal act? Indeed, why were some industry members using diesel in frack fluids after 2005? Did they disclose its use to state or federal regulators? Or were they acting lawlessly?

John Ranger, who headed the **Pennsylvania department of environmental protection** for two years during the Marcellus shale boom, recently spoke at a conference here in Houston. He reported that his emergency beeper went off many more times with alerts related to natural gas drilling (particularly gas migration into homes) than to coal mining. He spoke tellingly of how important it is to have strong regulation and knowledgeable regulators who can quickly address and then solve problems related to the booming shale gas industry.

Let's use good science to develop the facts about shale gas development and its related environmental risks — and then use wise regulation to reduce risks to the lowest possible level. This will do much to prevent the enactment of local moratoria banning shale gas development, as has happened in areas of the Marcellus.

The wise voices in industry are welcoming the EPA study and commenting on it to assure an impartial and thorough analysis. Those opposed to shale gas development have the same opportunity to comment. A well-planned EPA study can educate all of us in industry, government, academe and civic forums. Defensive posturing suggests the industry has something to hide and is not the way to realize the potential of this remarkable resource to our national energy supply.

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