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Natural gas in Parker County water wells not from Barnett Shale, driller says

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Methane gas that contaminated two Parker County water wells did not come from Range Resources' natural gas wells drilled into the Barnett Shale, but instead from the much-shallower Strawn formation, company officials and their consultants are expected to contend at a Texas Railroad Commission staff hearing today in Austin.

Representatives of Range said in recent interviews that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency conducted a flawed investigation that resulted in a misguided Dec. 7 emergency order against the Fort Worth-based gas producer.

EPA officials are not expected to attend today's hearing despite the commission's invitation. The EPA has not submitted any information for the hearing, commission spokeswoman Ramona Nye said Tuesday.

"From a legal perspective, we don't think it's appropriate for the [EPA] order to have been issued, when we didn't get any opportunity ahead of time to come in and present any evidence," said David Poole, Range's general counsel.

"We don't think there's any factual basis for any portion of the order, either in its conclusion as to Range's contribution to the contamination or the existence of an emergency," Poole said.

In issuing the order, EPA Regional Administrator Al Armendariz said the agency was "very concerned" that gas could migrate into homes through water lines, leading to a fire or explosion.

"From Range's perspective, when Dr. Armendariz got on TV and said there were people out there whose homes were in danger of blowing up, he either was willfully ignorant of the facts or he lied," Poole said.

The EPA has defended its investigation but did not reply to requests for a response to Range's criticisms.

A Range consultant, Keith Wheeler, principal hydrogeologist for Pastor, Behling & Wheeler in Round Rock, said water samples from 28 wells in the south Parker County area, site of the two contaminated water wells, showed "no exceedances" of regulatory standards for safe drinking water.

Range said it did the sampling at the request of the Railroad Commission.

The EPA maintains that two nearby Range gas wells drilled in 2009 into the Barnett Shale, more than a mile underground, are the source of the methane that contaminated the water wells at two homes in the Silverado subdivision in far south Parker County.

Range argues that the methane came from the Strawn formation, only several hundred feet deep, into which natural gas wells were drilled in the early 1980s. Methane is the primary component of natural gas.

Consultants for Range said their testing showed that the gas in the contaminated water well of Parker County resident Steven Lipsky contained substantial nitrogen, as does gas from the Strawn. Barnett Shale gas is low in nitrogen.

"So nitrogen is the distinguishing fingerprint," said Alan Kornacki, a senior petroleum systems analyst with Weatherford Laboratories in Houston. "High nitrogen content means the gas was produced from the Strawn."

Lipsky said Tuesday that he doesn't know where the gas that polluted his well came from. "We're waiting for the evidence," he said.

Lipsky said his well will never again supply water to his home. "It's a gas well, not a water well," he said.

John McBeath, a Range consultant and petroleum engineer from the Austin firm of Platt, Sparks & Associates, asserts that the gas showing up in Lipsky's well and others over the past 25 years is related to Strawn production.

"And I base that on my review of the incidents of these water wells showing gas prior to Barnett Shale development and also my review of the mechanical integrity of the two Range [gas] wells at issue," McBeath said.

Charles Kreidler, a Range consultant and vice president of LGB-Guyton Associates of Austin, which specializes in groundwater and environmental engineering, said his research shows that Strawn gas has leaked upward into the Trinity Aquifer, a source for water wells, for many years.

Poole said Range plans to appeal the EPA order no later than Friday with the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals. Range and the EPA are battling in federal court in Austin over whether several EPA officials should be required to have their depositions taken regarding the

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agency's investigation.

The hearing is expected to last two to three days. In two to three months, examiners are expected to recommend provisions for a final commission order addressing the contamination issue.

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