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New online chemicals database could alter natural gas fracking debate

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Put aside the growing file of letters, reports and testimonials from state environmental regulators across the country confirming that hydraulic fracturing has never adversely affected underground sources of drinking water.

Opponents of natural gas development proclaim that those regulators don't know what they're talking about because they don't know what materials are actually going down the well.

That's the talking point, anyway -- and one that's proven especially effective as a means of rallying opposition to use of hydraulic fracturing, a technology that's served as a staple of energy development in America for more than 60 years, and one that's been successfully deployed more than 1.1 million times over that span.

But what do you suppose might happen to that talking point if a national database detailing the specific chemical identities of those materials was started online? What if that database included site-by-site information, providing not only the names of the additives that comprise less than 0.5 percent of the fracturing solution, but the Chemical Abstract Services numbers unique to each of those additives? What if that registry also included volumetric information, and readouts of the specific concentrations used for each of the materials at the well site?

Well, we're about to find out. Earlier this month, the Ground Water Protection Council, a national, not-for-profit organization of state water and environmental regulators, teamed up with the Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission to start precisely this sort of national registry online.

Accessible at fracfocus.org, the genius of this database is in its design -- a design that allows for easy navigation by the public, and easy access to a substantial body of information covering everything from fluid disclosure rules in Arkansas to well-casing standards in Montana.

In truth, the vast majority of this information has been available to state and federal regulators for years. In recent years, several states have sought to build on that existing body of data, creating new platforms along the way for information to be disseminated to and contextualized for the public at large. The start of the GWPC database represents the next step in that critical process. It won't be the last.

Of course, whether the release of this new database will end up changing the nature of the debate over shale development is anyone's guess. Last November, when the service company Halliburton unveiled a new website highlighting the identities of both the additives and the constituents it uses to conduct fracturing operations in Pennsylvania, groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council were quick to pan the initiative, telling reporters that such disclosure is "not meaningful" absent information provided on a site-by-site basis (never mind that service companies don't even own that data to begin with).

In a forum held at the Heritage Foundation late last year, the Environmental Defense Fund set a different standard for acceptable disclosure, citing the inclusion of CAS numbers as the basic test against which future initiatives would be judged.

As mentioned, the GWPC database includes not only site-by-site information, but CAS numbers as well. As of this writing, neither group appears to have taken a formal position on this new national registry. But assuming their standards haven't changed, there's no reason to believe they wouldn't be supportive -- is there?

If the debate over fluid disclosure is really a debate over whether fracturing technology can be deployed safely and without harming groundwater and the environment, that's a debate our industry is excited to have -- and one that the start of this new database puts us in a much better position to win.

Lee Fuller is vice president of government affairs for the Independent Petroleum Association of America.

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