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Pa. DEP studying leak at gas well

The XTO leak polluted a Lycoming County stream. It was not the company's first leak.

By Marc Levy

Associated Press

HARRISBURG - State officials were investigating a leak of drilling wastewater at a natural-gas well site in north-central Pennsylvania that polluted a stream and a spring, a Department of Environmental Protection spokesman said Tuesday.

A department inspector discovered the leak last week while visiting a producing well owned by XTO Energy Inc. in Lycoming County, where the company is tapping into the vast Marcellus Shale gas reserve.

The inspector noticed an open bottom valve on a 21,000-gallon tank containing fluids left over from the hydraulic fracturing process used to stimulate a newly drilled well. The inspector closed the valve, but tests on two nearby waterways show signs of pollution, the department said.

Investigators still do not know how the valve opened, and have not met with XTO officials yet, department spokesman Dan Spadoni said.

A spokeswoman for XTO's parent company, Houston-based Exxon Mobil Corp., said Tuesday that about 2,400 gallons leaked and that XTO was cleaning it up and taking steps to keep it from happening again. The company initially told state officials that, as a worst-case scenario, about 13,000 gallons could have leaked, but it settled on the lower figure after employees reviewed inventory records, Exxon spokeswoman Rachael Moore said.

Neither Moore nor Spadoni knew how long the fluid had been sitting in the tank.

This was not the first such leak for XTO.

Violation records posted online by the department from a May inspection of a Lycoming County well owned by XTO reported a wastewater spill of about five barrels, or 200 gallons, because of an open valve. Before the latest leak, XTO had racked up 31 violations in 2010, according to department records.

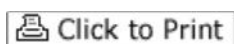
XTO has drilled more than 20 Marcellus Shale wells in Pennsylvania since the beginning of 2009, department records show.

In the hydraulic fracturing process, millions of gallons of water, sand, and chemicals are blasted into the well to break apart the shale and release the gas.

The wastewater that comes back up the well is typically a toxic sludge of dissolved chlorides, sulfates, and metals accumulated in the shale, and must either be treated on site or be trucked away to a special treatment facility.

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