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In executive changes, Range adds safety post, focuses on East U.S.

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Range Resources is shuffling executives in what the company calls "an expansion of its environmental and safety efforts" as well as a heightened focus on the Marcellus Shale natural gas field.

Ray Walker, senior vice president of Range's Marcellus Shale Division based outside Pittsburgh, will become senior vice president for environment, safety and regulatory compliance, a new position, the company said Thursday.

Mark Whitley, a senior vice president and expert on North Texas' Barnett Shale, will oversee operations in the Marcellus Shale, in the Appalachian region of the eastern U.S., where it is devoting 86 percent of its 2011 capital budget of \$1.4 billion. Range is selling almost all of its Barnett Shale assets for \$900 million to Legend Natural Gas IV of Houston.

Whitley's new title is senior vice president for Northern Appalachia and Southwest operations. He will oversee the company's new Northern Marcellus and Southern Marcellus divisions and its Southwest division, which includes operations in Texas and New Mexico.

Mike Middlebrook, vice president of operations for North Texas, will become vice president for the Northern Marcellus Division. John Applegath, vice president of operations for Pennsylvania, will become vice president of the Southern Marcellus Division.

Walker "will ensure that Range is implementing best practices not only in the Marcellus, but in all the company's operating areas," Range said. He will continue as chairman of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, a group of energy companies involved in the gas field.

Range CEO John Pinkerton said Walker's new role "reflects our commitment to environmental and safety efforts and adopting best practices. Ray led the technical team that developed large-scale water recycling in the Marcellus, pushed for enhanced operational standards and helped lead Range's effort to fully disclose hydraulic fracturing fluids on a per-well basis."

Best practices refers to employing technological and operational methods to maximize safety and minimize environmental harm of drilling and completing oil and natural gas wells, maintaining production and pipeline facilities, and handling large volumes of wastewater generated from hydraulic fracturing of wells and production from them. Some organizations critical of oil and gas operations, including the Texas Oil & Gas Accountability Project, have issued their own "best practices" recommendations.

Energy companies have become more sensitive to public concerns about intense shale-gas drilling around the country as well as oil field accidents and spills, topped by the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The Environmental Protection Agency contends that two Range natural gas wells "caused or contributed" to methane contamination in two Parker County residential water wells, a charge that Range denies.

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