

State officials say use of diesel in frack jobs not a big problem

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The use of diesel fuel in hydraulic fracturing fluid does not represent a major problem in two oil- and gas-producing states cited in a congressional report this week, regulators who oversee drilling operations in those states said Tuesday.

On Monday, three US representatives claimed that a dozen well-servicing companies have injected more than 32 million gallons of diesel or diesel-based products into oil and natural gas wells between 2005 and 2009, in what they called "an apparent violation of the Safe Drinking Water Act."

In a letter to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson, three Democratic members of the US House of Representatives' Committee on Energy and Commerce -- Henry Waxman of California, Edward Markey of Massachusetts, and Diana DeGette of Colorado -- said that a year-long investigation revealed that 12 of 14 oilfield service companies surveyed had injected diesel fuel or products containing at least 30% diesel into gas and oil wells in 19 states during the study period.

Although the lawmakers said they believe the 12 companies acted in violation of the Safe Drinking Water Act, the companies and industry associations contend the composition of fracking fluid conforms to existing federal and state regulations.

Likewise, some state regulators also dispute the lawmakers' conclusions.

Lawrence Bengal, director of the Arkansas Oil and Gas Commission, told Platts Tuesday that the statement released by the lawmakers contained misleading information about the extent of the use of diesel in frack jobs in his state.

According to a chart included in the representatives' statement, 414,492 gallons of diesel fuel or diesel-related products were injected into Arkansas wells during the study period.

But Bengal said the actual volume of diesel fuel might be much less than the chart appears to suggest.

"As you read those charts, it talks about diesel fuel components in the frack fluid. It doesn't say the actual amount of diesel. The charts are misleading as to what they're saying," he said.

Bengal said the state, which recently passed new regulations requiring the disclosure of chemical components of fracking fluid, normally would require a special permit for the injection of large volumes of diesel, but that is seldom the case in modern frack jobs.

The amount of diesel fuel reported by the lawmakers was so small as to be insignificant, Bengal said.

"We regulate the use of a diesel frack if diesel was the base fluid of the frack," he said. "If it's a small component of a water frack, that wouldn't require a permit."

He added that he was unaware of any frack job performed in the state where diesel was the chief component of the frack fluid.

In addition, under the state's rules, the only time when the use of diesel in fracking fluid would become an issue would be when the fracking was being injected into strata that also served as an underground source of drinking water.

"If you're injecting into a non-USDW, you're not endangering the freshwater zones," he said.

Alabama had 2,464 gallons of diesel or diesel-related products injected into its wells during the study period, the third from the bottom on the lawmakers' chart in terms of volumes.

However, David Bolin, deputy director of the Alabama Oil and Gas Board, told Platts he believed the number should have been zero. "I'm not aware of any fracking that has used diesel fuel in that time period," he said.

He explained that most of the hydraulic fracturing that takes place in the state occurs in coalbed methane play, where "for a number of years we have expressly prohibited the use of diesel in hydraulic fracturing."

The prohibition arises from a federal case in the early 2000s, in which an environmental group sued the EPA over the use of diesel-laced fracking fluids in shallow CBM wells.

That case resulted in a memorandum of understanding in December 2003, between EPA and three of the largest fracking companies, Halliburton, BJ Services and Schlumberger, in which the companies promised to "eliminate diesel fuel in hydraulic fracturing fluids injected into coalbed methane production wells in underground sources of drinking water."

Bolin said he had not seen the report issued by the three US Congress members and could not comment directly on it.

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