

MI Gas Well Leak Prompts Fracking Investigation

JOYFIELD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) - A leak that forced the shutdown of operations at a more than 1,000-foot-deep natural gas well that was being drilled in Michigan's northwestern Lower Peninsula with a technique called hydraulic fracturing likely will lead to a review of some drilling regulations, the state said Thursday.

The leak at the well in Benzie County's Joyfield Township was detected late Monday or early Tuesday, and the leak was stopped and contained Tuesday, the state Department of Natural Resources and Environment said. The department said there was no imminent danger and an initial review found the spill was limited to a small area right around the well.

"The company had just installed a new well," said DNRE spokesman Brad Wurfel. "They turned it on and found liquid bubbling."

The department said it was the first time such a hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, operation has experienced a leak in Michigan. About 12,000 wells in Michigan have been drilled using the technique since the 1960s, the state said.

The state said cement used to contain a steel sleeve where liquid is pumped apparently failed, causing the leak in the well that was being drilled through a rock bed called Antrim Shale. But Joe Quandt, a lawyer representing Presidium Antrim West LC, the company drilling the well, said Thursday afternoon the company still was investigating and it was too soon to say a cause.

"We are developing a response plan," Quandt said. The company doesn't anticipate an environmental impact around the well, located about 25 miles southwest of Traverse City, but will continue to monitor the well, he said.

The leak may lead to a review of some regulations related to permits and monitoring for such wells, the state said. Current regulations require companies to disclose details of the chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing only if there's a spill, for example, and Wurfel said the state previously was looking at whether companies should be required to routinely reveal that information.

Hugh McDermid Jr., spokesman for the Michigan Environmental Council, said that although hydraulic fracturing has long been used in Michigan there needs to be fresh discussion about regulations, especially with the possibility of deeper such wells being discussed nationwide. He said the leak could intensify the call for a public review.

"This incident illustrates for us the need for a public dialogue over whether we need to look at or change any the fracking regulations," he said.

Hydraulic fracturing has come under increasing scrutiny recently as drilling crews flock to the Marcellus Shale, a rock bed beneath New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio. The oil and gas industry says hydraulic fracturing has been used safely for decades. Environmentalists, however, fear that fluids or wastewater from the process could pollute drinking water supplies.

Deb Muchmore, a spokeswoman for the Michigan Oil and Gas Association, said the leak is a reminder that the industry must remain vigilant. She said the industry group was pleased with the way the state and the company responded to the leak.

The company immediately contacted the state and began efforts to stop it, and has poured more cement into the well, the department said. About 62,000 gallons of liquid that included nitrogen and a hydrochloric acid additive was being used in the hydraulic fracturing process, the state said, and the leak was spotted when nitrogen and water were seen bubbling in an encased housing at the surface of the well.

At the drill site, the nearest water well is about a quarter mile away, the state said, and any nitrogen that escaped was expected to dissipate quickly. An investigation and monitoring was planned to determine what longer-term cleanup might be needed.

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