

# DEP Investigates PA Methane Contamination

MICHAEL RUBINKAM, Associated Press

ALLENTOWN, Pa. (AP) — Pennsylvania environmental regulators and a gas-drilling company are investigating the source of methane that potentially contaminated three private water wells and a pond in northeastern Pennsylvania.

The water wells are located near two natural gas well pads operated by Cabot Oil & Gas Corp., the Houston-based company that endured harsh criticism over contamination of private water wells in nearby Dimock Township.

The Department of Environmental Protection confirmed Wednesday it is collecting samples from the gas wells and water wells in Lenox Township, Susquehanna County, to see if there is a match, with results expected in several weeks. No determination has been made about the source of the stray methane, according to department spokesman Daniel Spadoni.

Methane is not known to be toxic, but in high concentrations it can be explosive and cause unconsciousness and even death, since it displaces oxygen needed to breathe.

Cabot has vented the water wells and installed methane alarms in each of the three homes, state officials said.

Company officials said they were working closely with state inspectors to ensure residents' safety.

"We have employees actively gathering samples and collecting data," the company said in a statement Wednesday. "In partnership with DEP, we have placed a rush on getting back all results."

Company spokesman George Stark told The Associated Press that the three homes affected are between 1,000 and 2,500 feet from its well pads.

Cabot tests the water of homes up to 2,500 feet from its wells before drilling, so the company has pre-drilling test results to use in a comparison, Stark said. The results of those earlier tests were not immediately available.

The Department of Environmental Protection also sampled water wells that serve the nearby Mountainview Junior-Senior High School and elementary school. Spadoni said no methane was detected in the head space of the wells or in the campus buildings.

One of the Cabot well pads under investigation is located on a 500-acre farm owned by longtime Mountainview School Board President James Zick, who also owns the pond that DEP said it found to be bubbling with "combustible gas."

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Zick denied the bubbling is out of the ordinary.

"When I was down there yesterday (Monday), I don't think the DEP people saw anything," Zick told The Times-Tribune of Scranton, which first reported the suspected methane contamination. He called natural gas drilling a safe process but acknowledged there are "some issues that have made bumps in the road."

A telephone message left for Zick by The Associated Press was not immediately returned Wednesday.

Cabot has stopped drilling on the Zick pad, which has four wells, none of which have been hydraulically fractured or "fracked." The other Cabot pad has three Marcellus Shale wells, one of which has been fracked, DEP said.

Fracking is a drilling technique in which millions of gallons of water, as well as sand and chemical additives, are pumped at high pressure down the well to break up shale rock and release natural gas. Environmentalists claim it can pollute groundwater, but the industry insists it is safe.

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