Company Cautions against Linking Well, Quakes

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YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio (AP) — Boos, applause and the occasional outburst marked a gathering of about 500 Ohio residents seeking explanations for a series of earthquakes that has hit their area since deep injection drilling came to town.

At a news conference after the forum Wednesday, the company said it voluntarily

shut down an oil and gas wastewater well in Youngstown to study any links to the quakes and urged caution in accepting a seismologist's finding that their injection well almost certainly caused the quakes.

"It is in the best interest of the community to allow the research process to play out," said Vince Bevacqua, a spokesman for D&L Energy. "The well that people are concerned about — rightly or wrongly — is offline and will stay offline until we have answers."

Bevacqua said that the seismologist made his judgment from "an office in New York" and that no one has definitively proven the quakes are related to activity at the well. The company has commissioned a study and is depressurizing the well following the shutdown.

In a state investigation into 11 earthquakes in the region this year, Columbia University seismologist John Armbruster said that the injection of thousands of gallons of brine wastewater daily into the injection well almost certainly caused the quakes. State officials said they believed the well activity caused pressure to build near a fault line and led to the seismic activity.

Armbruster's finding intensified the debate over hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, used to extract natural gas from underground shale. The Youngstown well took wastewater from all sorts of drilling in the oil and gas industry. It is an injection well, not a well for extracting oil and gas.

Bevacqua said the company hopes its own study will provide different feedback. The study has not been started yet and Bevacqua was not able to provide a timetable.

Many residents who attended the Wednesday forum experienced the 4.0 magnitude New Year's Eve quake, which led to Gov. John Kasich calling a moratorium on injection drilling in the region. Several said fear and concern brought them out.

"Your saltwater is radioactive poison!" shouted one participant.

Retiree Bob Gray, a lifelong resident of Youngstown, said regulators who attended the event didn't provide satisfactory answers.

"I feel like my intelligence has been insulted," said Gray, 70. He described the forum as "a dog and pony show."

Gray and others questioned why wastewater from fracking is being shipped into Ohio for disposal when nearby Pennsylvania and New York don't want it. Pennsylvania drillers are recycling much of the water they use, but Ohio has a contract to accept a portion of the Pennsylvania wastewater.

Bill Kinney, a petroleum executive representing the Ohio Oil & Gas Association at the forum, said the shipments aren't unusual.

"There are all types of interstate commerce, that happens to be one of them," he said. "Pennsylvania is not Afghanistan. It's the state next to us."

Joseph Planey, 65, a Boardman resident who works as a consultant, said the public meeting was a good start.

"More detail needs to be gotten into," he said. "I think the depth of the problem can't be addressed in a two-hour meeting."

D&L voluntarily shut the well down Dec. 30 after the 10th earthquake Christmas Eve. After a New Year's quake of magnitude 4.0, Gov. John Kasich ordered a moratorium on all wastewater injection wells within a roughly five-mile radius of the Youngstown well. The moratorium applied to four additional wells, although they were already inactive.

Kasich, a first-term Republican, has tried to distance the injection well process from natural gas drilling and fracking. His administration has emphasized that 176 other injection wells have been operating in Ohio since the mid-1980s without any notable seismic activity.

Armbruster, of Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, N.Y., has said injection wells have also been suspected in quakes in Astabula in far northeast Ohio, and in Arkansas, Colorado and Oklahoma.

At the forum Wednesday, Dan Mincks, 35, an autoworker from Boardman, stood patiently through state presentations with his 8-month-old daughter, Lily, in his arms. On New Year's Eve, his wife Julie was changing Lily's diaper when she felt the earthquake rock the ground.

"I actually thought a car hit the house, or she fell," Mincks said, pointing to his wife.

Mincks said he sees the shale drilling boon that's come to Ohio as a good thing for the ailing economy. He and his wife have been helping the Sierra Club collect periodic seismic readings near their home.

Julie Mincks, who grew up in the area, said construction of a drilling access road is just being completed on her mother's Columbiana County farm.

"I think it's good for the area as long as it's closely monitored," she said.

D&L Energy, whose affiliate Northstar Disposal Services LLC operates the Youngstown well, plans to share its geologic study with state regulators in hopes of getting the well reopened. Bevacqua said regulators, researchers and journalists "will scrutinize these results to an unusually high level to ensure their credibility, and D&L accepts that."

Rep. Robert Hagan, a local Democrat, helped organize the Wednesday meeting. Ohio Department of Natural Resources experts were joined by an academic, environmentalist, and a representative of the oil and gas drilling industry.

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