Town with Tainted Wells Getting New EPA Water

MICHAEL RUBINKAM,Associated Press

ALLENTOWN, Pa. (AP) — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday that it will deliver fresh water to four homes in a northeastern Pennsylvania village where residential water wells were tainted by a gas driller. The agency also said it will begin testing the water supplies of dozens more homes as it ramps up its investigation more than three years after homeowners say the water supply was ruined.

Capping a tumultuous two weeks in which the EPA first promised the residents a tanker of water — and then quickly backed away, saying more study was needed — federal environmental regulators said they have concluded that contaminant levels in four of the homes pose a health hazard and require emergency action. Some of the water samples, the agency said, were found to be polluted with cancer-causing arsenic and synthetic chemicals typically found in drilling fluids.

The first delivery of water is scheduled for Friday.

"I can't even tell you, again, what a relief this is. because that's all we've asked for — water," said Julie Sautner, one of the homeowners.

Additionally, EPA said it will sample water at 61 homes in the area of Carter and Meshoppen roads "to assess further whether any residents are being exposed to hazardous substances that cause health concerns." The testing, to be carried out over the next several weeks, marks a significant expansion of the agency's probe in Dimock, a tiny crossroads at the center of a national debate over gas drilling and the extraction technique known as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

More than a dozen homeowners in Dimock say they have been without a reliable supply of clean water since Cabot Oil & Gas Corp., the Houston-based drilling firm blamed for polluting their aquifer, won permission from state regulators to halt daily deliveries on Nov. 30.

After analyzing sampling data provided by Cabot, the residents, and the state Department of Environmental Protection, EPA said hazardous substances were found in the water wells of several homes. But only in four homes were they in high enough concentrations to present a health threat, the agency said. EPA said it might provide water to additional homes, or stop delivering water altogether, depending on the results of its own testing,

"EPA is working diligently to understand the situation in Dimock and address residents' concerns," EPA Regional Administrator Shawn M. Garvin said in a statement. "We believe that the information provided to us by the residents deserves further review, and conducting our own sampling will help us fill information gaps. Our actions will be based on the science and the law and we will

work to help get a more complete picture of water quality for these homes in Dimock."

EPA said the federal Superfund program — the environmental fund used to clean up abandoned hazardous waste sites — authorized it to take emergency action in Dimock.

It's not clear how many wells in Dimock were affected by the drilling, which began in 2008. The state has found that at least 18 residential water wells were fouled by stray methane gas from Cabot's drilling operation, although EPA said Thursday that its own door-to-door survey turned up 20 water wells on those same parcels.

Cabot, which was banned in 2010 from drilling in a 9-square-mile area around the village, took legal responsibility for the methane found in the wells, but contends that water wells in the area were tainted with the gas long before the company arrived. The company also says it met a state deadline to restore or replace Dimock's water supply, installing treatment systems in some houses that have removed the methane.

But 11 homeowners who are suing Cabot say their aquifer is still tainted with methane and also with toxic chemicals that are used in fracking, a technique in which water, sand and chemicals are blasted deep underground to free natural gas from dense rock deposits like the Marcellus Shale found in Pennsylvania and surrounding states. Cabot denies responsibility for the presence of any chemicals found in the wells.

EPA said the sampling data it reviewed turned up hazardous levels of substances including:

—arsenic, a cancer-causing element that may be present in elevated concentrations due to drilling;

—barium, a silvery-white metal and a common constituent in drilling fluids that can damage the kidneys with extended exposure.

—DEHP, a chemical added to plastics to make them flexible, a probable human carcinogen; also used in drilling;

—glycols, including ethylene glycol, an antifreeze commonly found in drilling fluids;

—manganese, a naturally occurring substance that is sometimes used in drilling fluids and can damage the central nervous system if ingested.

EPA's decision to intervene in Dimock is unlikely to sit well with Pennsylvania's environmental chief, Michael Krancer, who has accused the EPA of having only a "rudimentary" understanding of the situation there.

Krancer, a frequent EPA critic who serves under pro-drilling GOP Gov. Tom Corbett, urged Garvin in a letter released publicly last week to allow any EPA probe to "be

guided by sound science and the law instead of emotion and publicity."

DEP spokeswoman Katy Gresh said after the EPA announcement Thursday that "EPA does not seem to have presented any new data here. More than a year ago, DEP's enforcement action addressed this issue and ensured funds were set aside to resolve the water quality issues for these homeowners."

She said DEP agrees that additional sampling is necessary in Dimock and is working with its federal counterpart.

Cabot rejected EPA's characterization of the sampling data and insisted that Dimock's drinking water meets federal standards.

"Cabot believes that the U.S. EPA has a flawed interpretation of the data and has taken it out of context; this has resulted in an unwarranted investigation by U.S. EPA regarding water quality. PADEP has extensively investigated alleged groundwater concerns in the Dimock area and concluded, using sound science, that it was safe," Cabot spokesman George Stark said in a statement.

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