

W. Pa. tests: Chemicals in drilling area water

KEVIN BEGOS - Associated Press - Associated Press

A western Pennsylvania woman says state environmental officials refused to do follow-up tests after their lab reported her drinking water contained chemicals that could be from nearby gas drilling.

At least 10 households in the rural Woodlands community, about 30 miles north of Pittsburgh, have complained that recent drilling impacted their water in different ways.

The Department of Environmental Protection first suggested that Janet McIntyre's well water contained low levels of only one chemical, toluene. But a review of the DEP tests by The Associated Press found four other volatile organic compounds in her water that can be associated with gas drilling.

DEP spokesman Kevin Sunday said on Friday that the low chemical concentrations were not a health risk, and suggested that the contamination may have come from the agency's laboratory itself or from abandoned vehicles on or near the property. But Sunday didn't answer why DEP failed to do follow-up tests if the DEP suspected that its own lab was contaminated.

One public health expert said the lack of follow-up tests by DEP doesn't make sense.

"DEP cannot just simply walk away," said Dr. Bernard Goldstein, professor emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health.

McIntyre and other residents say the water problems started about a year ago, after Rex Energy Corp. of State College, Pa., drilled two wells. But a map Rex provided also shows gas wells from other companies in the area.

Residents in the community have been complaining for nearly a year, but DEP never revealed the possible presence of chemicals to the general public.

Rex has been supplying drinking water to many households, but has sent letters notifying them it will no longer deliver drinking water after Feb. 29.

In a statement, Rex said that the wells of residents who have complained are from 2,100 to 4,600 feet from its drilling locations. The company noted that many other homeowners in the area haven't raised complaints or concerns.

Rex also said there are old oil wells in the region that could impact some ground water, and that there were "no notable differences in water chemistry between pre- and post-drill water quality tests of the water wells in question."

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

McIntyre's water showed detectable levels of t-Butyl alcohol, acetone, chloromethane, toluene and 1, 3, 5-trimethylbenzene. The chemicals can be used in the high-pressure hydraulic fracturing process that has led to a production boom of deep shale gas in Pennsylvania. But some are also commonly used in households and other industry, such as toluene, a paint thinner.

Goldstein said the multi-chemical mix is what is so unusual, since it suggests either multiple sources of contamination, or an industry that uses many different chemicals.

"Where would you get such a strange mixture?" Goldstein asked. "Is this coming from drilling?" He added that the low concentrations shown in the test may not be a health threat, and may not be connected to gas drilling. But if DEP's own laboratory was even a potential source of the chemicals, the agency had the obligation to follow up.

"You've got to pursue the finding," Goldstein said, since if the lab was at fault the variety of chemicals that showed up "makes no sense at all, except a really sloppy lab."

Sunday said an independent peer review of the DEP laboratory found it to be "a well-managed, efficient and highly functional laboratory" that is "driven by a culture of customer service."

McIntyre told the AP that she repeatedly asked a DEP field worker for follow-ups after two separate tests last summer showed the chemicals, as well as elevated levels of some natural underground compounds such as barium.

"He said no," she said, leaving her feeling that she had no one to turn to for an objective public health opinion. She also said the chemicals didn't show up on pre-drill water tests.

As drillers have poured into Pennsylvania to tap its vast Marcellus Shale gas reserves, residents and environmentalists have raised concerns over the impact or potential impact to water supplies. Water contamination in Dimock, in northeast Pennsylvania, has riled some homeowners for months.

State regulators determined that Houston, Texas-based Cabot Oil & Gas Co. drilled faulty gas wells that allowed methane to escape into Dimock's aquifer. The company paid heavy fines but denied responsibility; it has been banned from drilling in a 9-square-mile area of Dimock since April 2010.

Another Woodlands resident who complained about dramatic changes in her water over the last year said DEP staff suggested the bad smell was simply from garden slugs in her well, which is 300 feet deep.

"They just insult your intelligence. I don't trust the DEP," said Kim McEvoy, who lives about a mile from McIntyre.

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McEvoy said she wants the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to investigate the community, and that she's come to that point because state environmental officials haven't answered her questions.

"Something has happened here," McEvoy said.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/25/2014 - 12:37am):

<http://www.chem.info/news/2012/02/w-pa-tests-chemicals-drilling-area-water>