EPA: Water Quality OK in PA Gas Drilling Town

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SCRANTON, Pa. (AP) — Federal environmental regulators said Thursday that well water testing at 11 homes in a northeastern Pennsylvania village where a gas driller was accused of polluting the aquifer failed to show elevated levels of contamination.

The Environmental Protection Agency, which is sampling well water at dozens of homes in Dimock, Susquehanna County, said initial test results "did not show levels of contamination that could present a health concern."

Dimock has been at the center of a fierce debate over the environmental and public health impacts of Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale drilling industry.

State environmental regulators had previously determined that Houston-based Cabot Oil & Gas Corp. contaminated the aquifer underneath homes along Carter Road in Dimock with explosive levels of methane gas. Residents who are suing Cabot assert their water is also polluted with drilling chemicals. Many other residents of Dimock say that the water is clean and that the plaintiffs are exaggerating problems with their wells to help their lawsuit.

The federal environmental agency began testing the water in January, more than a month after the state Department of Environmental Protection allowed Cabot to stop delivering replacement water to about a dozen families.

The EPA said water samples from six of the 11 homes for which it received initial test results showed sodium, methane, chromium or bacteria, but at levels that did not exceed primary or secondary drinking water standards. Arsenic was found in the well water of two homes, but at levels that did not present a health hazard, regulators said.

Of the 11 homes, EPA has been delivering fresh water to three homes where it said prior test results had showed alarming levels of contamination. EPA said it will continue supplying water to the homes "while we perform additional sampling to ensure that the drinking water quality at these homes remains consistent and acceptable for use over time."

Dimock resident Scott Ely, who is among the plaintiffs suing Cabot, disputed the EPA interpretation of his test results. He said the results showed a range of contaminants at unsafe levels, including sodium and arsenic.

"We've had hundreds of tests done out here, and we've had so many different scientists say you have bad water here, there's not a doubt about it. And yet when the state and feds test our water, they say we can drink it," said Ely, who plans to meet with the EPA to review the test results. "Absolutely not."

Cabot said in a statement that it is pleased by the EPA test results and that it is "steadfastly committed to environmental stewardship, collaboration with state regulators, and compliance with all applicable federal, state and local laws."

The EPA is awaiting test results from more homes. Meanwhile, emails obtained by The Associated Press show that borough council members from nearby Montrose opposed an arrangement by which some Dimock residents have been using water drawn from Montrose's municipal supply. In one email, Councilman Sean Granahan wrote to other council members that Dimock residents were "looking to pirate our water and pocket the proceeds from their royalties and settlements."

The email was sent on Feb. 7, one day after council members abruptly walked out on a meeting where two Dimock residents and two anti-drilling activists showed up to observe and record the council's discussion of the privately owned hydrant. Granahan did not immediately return a phone message left by AP on Thursday.

WBNG-TV first reported on the emails.

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