

Fewer than 30 Health Complaints on Drilling

KEVIN BEGOS, Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — The Pennsylvania Department of Health said this week that it has received fewer than 30 complaints over the last year from people who feel natural gas drilling has affected their health, but it's not clear how many came before that. Last June the agency head suggested it had already received several dozen.

The information came in response to a Right to Know request from The Associated Press, but the agency has refused to provide details of the complaints, such as where and when they originated.

The state's public health agency also said it has no manuals or guidelines for how its staff should respond to health complaints about gas drilling. One expert said that's because they don't have the funding to do so.

"This is not surprising," said Bernard Goldstein, professor emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health. "It hasn't got enough resources to do its core job."

The AP reported earlier this month that politicians stripped up to \$2 million in new Health Department funding from recent legislation that imposed a fee on the industry. Officials had planned to use the money to research the health impacts of gas drilling, and to create an official registry of cases.

Goldstein noted that 19 state agencies will get money from the impact fee, but the Health Department will get nothing.

The Marcellus Shale is a gas-rich rock formation thousands of feet underground in large parts of Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia. Over the last five years, advances in drilling technology made the shale accessible, leading to a boom in production, jobs, and profits — and a drop in natural gas prices for consumers.

In Pennsylvania, about 5,000 Marcellus Shale wells have been drilled since 2005. Environmental groups and some doctors claim that the drilling process, which uses chemicals and large volumes of water to free gas reserves deep underground, is bad for the environment and for public health, but the industry says it's safe.

Last June, Health Secretary Dr. Eli Avila told legislators that the agency had received several dozen health complaints over the previous year or so, and that the numbers were rising.

The Health Department notes that individual public health information is confidential, but the AP request specifically said it wasn't seeking individual names.

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The statewide figure of 30 complaints over the last year also raises questions of how concerns about gas drilling relate to other public health issues.

For example, state mortality databases show that 181 people died in 2010 from falls due to ice and snow. Cancer caused 28,680 deaths statewide in 2009.

Patrick Creighton, a spokesman for the Marcellus Shale Coalition, didn't directly comment on the number of health complaints.

"The regulatory structure governing clean-burning natural gas development in Pennsylvania is of the strongest in the nation and one we believe is working well for all 12.7 million Pennsylvanians, the industry and the environment," Creighton said.

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