Governor Disappointed by New EPA Extension

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CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead has joined those expressing disappointment that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has extended for a third time a public comment period on a report on groundwater pollution in a Wyoming gas field rather than moving toward wrapping up the study.

The comment period was supposed to end Tuesday. Last week, the EPA announced it would be extended to Sept. 30. That could postpone independent experts' formal review of the December, 2011, report by another eight months or more.

"Wyoming did not ask for this delay nor do we want it. This does not move us toward resolving the concerns of the landowners in the area," Mead said in a statement released Wednesday.

The report on the EPA's findings in the Pavillion area marked the first time the federal agency blamed hydraulic fracturing for a specific case of groundwater pollution. Fracking involves pumping water, sand and chemicals into oil and gas wells to fracture open rock formations and increase the flow of oil and gas.

The report widened the gap between environmentalists who characterize fracking as a threat to clean groundwater and petroleum industry officials who insist fracking is safe. Both sides agree on one thing: The comment period extension is unnecessary.

Doug Hock, spokesman for Calgary-based Encana, which owns the gas field in the Pavillion area in west-central Wyoming, said by email: "There's no credible reason for further delay."

Those with polluted well water "continue to suffer the effects of living in a contaminated environment" while peer review is delayed, John Fenton, chairman of the group Pavillion Area Concerned Citizens, said in a release last week.

Contacted by email Wednesday, EPA Region 8 spokesman Rich Mylott would not respond to the governor's remarks. He also did not answer a question about the EPA's plans for peer review of the report.

He reiterated part of a prepared statement the EPA released to reporters who asked about the extension.

"The Agency will take into account new data, further stakeholder input, and public comment as it continues to review the status of the Pavillion investigation and considers options for moving forward," Mylott wrote, adding that he had no more information to provide.

The comment period began on Dec. 14, 2011, and was extended twice last year.

The first extension was last March, after the state and EPA agreed to collaborate on further groundwater testing. The second extension was in October, soon after those new test results — which were similar to the results of EPA's earlier testing — came out.

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