Groups Want Broad EPA Probe of Tainted Water

RAMIT PLUSHNICK-MASTI,Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — More than 80 environmental groups on Monday demanded a broad investigation into whether the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency behaved improperly when it abruptly dropped enforcement actions against a gas driller it had accused of contaminating water in Texas.

The 86 groups from 12 states sent a letter to the EPA's inspector general, Arthur Elkins, asking that he widen an existing investigation into the agency's actions. They cited an Associated Press report indicating the agency had scientific evidence linking Range Resources' drilling operations to water tainted with explosive methane and cancer-causing benzene in Weatherford, a town west of Fort Worth.

Range Resources has said the EPA dropped its demands that the company provide affected families with clean water and locate the source of the contamination after the company threatened not to cooperate with a high-profile national study into hydraulic fracturing.

The groups, including Greenpeace, the Environmental Working Group and the Center for Biological Diversity, said the EPA's actions make it "appear that the agency is abdicating its legal obligation to protect the health and environment of all Americans."

The groups note that when the EPA dropped its enforcement actions and ended a legal battle with Range Resources, it did not mention an analysis done by Geoffrey Thyne, an independent scientist who was hired by the agency to analyze water samples it collected from more than 30 water wells in the Weatherford area. Thyne had concluded that the gas found in the water wells was similar to the gas Range Resources was producing from the Barnett shale rock formation.

Thyne's document, obtained by the AP, has never been made public by the EPA. The inspector general should consider in his investigation why the EPA made no mention of that study when critics said the actions against Range Resources lacked scientific credibility, the environmental groups' letter argued.

The EPA did not immediately comment on the letter. In the past, the agency has said dropping the action against Range Resources allowed it to "shift its focus in this case away from litigation and toward a joint effort on the science and safety of energy extraction."

Range Resources also did not immediately comment on the letter. The company has denied it contaminated Texas water, saying the gas in the water was from a different rock formation and does not originate in the Barnett shale.

In the letter, the environmental groups also question whether by not releasing

Thyne's report, the EPA denied the public "access to information that could be useful for preventing negative impacts" associated with hydraulic fracturing, also called fracking.

Fracking combined with horizontal drilling has allowed drillers to extract once out-of-reach gas and oil by pumping large volumes of chemical-laced water at high pressure into thick, impermeable rock formations. The process cracks the dense rock, releasing the oil and gas.

The industry contends the method is safe. Critics, however, say it contaminates water, and demand greater federal oversight.

In the case near Fort Worth, the EPA never said how the drilling operation contaminated the groundwater in that area.

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