CO Calls For New Oil Rules Post-Flood

DAN ELLIOTT, Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Colorado regulators said Thursday they will consider whether new rules are needed after 13 oil spills were blamed on last September's flood, but some county officials said the leaks were comparatively small and that the existing rules worked.

The Oil and Gas Conservation Commission will hold a hearing on potential new rules soon, Chairman Tom Compton said. He didn't set a date.

Compton and other state officials held a meeting Thursday to review lessons learned from the flood, which killed nine people and damaged or destroyed nearly 2,000 homes. Miles of roads were washed out and some sewage treatment plants were damaged.

Officials said the floods did not damage any oil or gas wells or hydraulic fracturing operations, but a number of storage tanks toppled or leaked.

The commission has said more than 43,000 gallons of oil spilled from overturned or damaged tanks. Another 18,000 gallons of water containing impurities from wells also spilled.

Tanks that were anchored by cables and protected by steel barriers fared best, said Mike Leonard, an inspection supervisor for the commission. He said a review by commission staffers concluded that tanks should be built on well-compacted soil and at the highest elevation practical.

The question the oil and gas commission must decide is whether to recommend such practices or require them.

Weld County Commissioner Barbara Kirkmeyer told Compton that the existing rules worked and cautioned against new ones.

Her county is in one of Colorado's most productive oil and gas fields and is also bisected by the South Platte River, which overflowed its banks and carved new channels during the flood.

"Let's not miss the point here. The rules worked," Kirkmeyer said. "When (the state health department) comes out a few days later and says what's in the water is E. coli and not oil, it shows you guys did a pretty good job."

Kirkmeyer said the biggest threat wasn't oil but was bacterial contaminants such as E. coli from sewage that spilled from damaged treatment plants.

Tisha Schuller, president of the Colorado Oil & Gas Association, an industry group, said oil spills got disproportionate attention from the news media, and that at least one stain reported as an oil leak turned out to be some other contaminant, not from a petroleum tank.

Other speakers advised the commission to plan for future floods, refine its communication channels with other agencies and consider limits on how close wells can be drilled to rivers.

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