

EPA hears from gas drillers, angry Pa. residents

July 23 2010, By MARC LEVY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Federal researchers studying a natural gas drilling technique that involves blasting chemical-laced water into the ground got an earful from residents who say it's poisoning them and killing their animals and from industry experts who say it's being unfairly demonized.

People who make a living from the industry and others who believe hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, has polluted their well [water](#) packed into a hotel ballroom in southwestern Pennsylvania on Thursday night to make an impression on the U.S. [Environmental Protection Agency](#) panel.

The speakers, each taking two minutes at a microphone, alternately told the EPA to expand its study and push tough new regulations or to limit the study and leave regulations to state agencies already doing the job. The hearing was part of a new look by the EPA at fracking as gas drillers swarm to the lucrative Marcellus Shale region primarily beneath Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia and Ohio and blast into other shale reserves around the country.

A petroleum geologist, Greg Wrightstone, said anti-capitalist demonization and misinformation should not drown out a solid foundation of data from thousands of wells drilled in Pennsylvania over decades that proves [water contamination](#) from fracking is highly unlikely.

"I'll ask the commissioners to use reason not hyperbole, facts not fiction, data and not unfounded hysteria in making decisions affecting shale

development in the United States," Wrightstone said. "Fears of environmental disaster are overblown and have little relation to actual technology."

The vast majority of speakers raised concerns about the process.

In fracking, drilling crews pump millions of gallons of sand- and chemical-laced water deep into the earth to break up dense rock to free the natural gas. Some of that water returns as a briny, chemical- and metal-laden brew and is usually stored in open pits until it's trucked to [treatment plants](#) or underground injection wells.

Residents of Hickory, about 15 miles southwest of Pittsburgh, called for intensive study of fracking and said their well water turned foul after drilling began nearby in the last few years.

Darrell Smitsky said five of his goats died mysteriously and, even though state regulators told him the water was safe, his own test showed sky-high levels of manganese and iron. When he blamed the drilling company, he said, it responded, "Can you prove it?"

Stephanie Hallowitch said her family's well water is no longer safe to even allow her children to run through the sprinklers.

"I urge the EPA to help my family and other families living near drilling to get answers to their questions," she said. The research, she continued, must be done "to protect other families before it is too late and they are in our situation."

The fracking process is currently exempt from federal regulation, and instead states apply their own rules to it.

The oil and gas industry steadfastly defends it as having been proven

safe over many years and says it is a crucial tool if the country is going to harvest its gas reserves at a time when natural gas is emerging as a greener energy alternative to coal or oil.

Advancements in horizontal drilling and [hydraulic fracturing](#) technology over the past decade have significantly increased the yield and economic viability of shale gas wells. The combination also is demanding larger amounts of water used in each well. Shale drilling is viewed as so lucrative that international exploration companies are investing billions of dollars in the pursuit.

James Erb, of the American Petroleum Institute, which represents major oil and gas producers, told the EPA that the sound application of fracking causes no significant risk to human health, drinking water sources or the environment.

Lou D'Amico, president of the Pennsylvania Independent Oil & Gas Association, made up of hundreds of businesses, said that no example exists of fracking having polluted ground water and that the EPA study should include a review of complaints lodged to state-level agencies and how they were investigated.

"The controversy is one based on media-generated public hysteria and perception, not science, fact or evidence," he said.

Canonsburg is at the heart of hundreds of Marcellus Shale wells that began to be drilled in earnest in 2008. Some geologists say the vast Marcellus Shale region could become the nation's largest [natural gas](#) field.

Already, about 1,500 Marcellus Shale wells have been drilled in Pennsylvania in barely two years, and thousands more are expected, transforming areas of the state. Numerous landowners are getting paid to

lease their land for drilling or are receiving royalty checks from producing wells. Meanwhile, many industries such as steel pipe makers and haulers are seeing huge new demand from drilling companies.

But many landowners are coming forward to tell stories about spoiled well water.

The EPA's \$1.9 million study is expected to yield preliminary results by the end of 2012, Fred Hauchman, director of the EPA's Office of Science Policy, told attendees at the outset.

Hauchman promised to reach out to experts and study a wide variety of water sources, and he said an advisory board of scientists has told the agency to focus on the impact on water quality and quantity.

©2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: EPA hears from gas drillers, angry Pa. residents (2010, July 23) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-epa-gas-drillers-angry-pa.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.