

Northern Colorado fracking concerns escalate in oil and gas boom

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Grover has been the center of the oil and gas drilling boom in northern Weld County since a gusher of an oil well tapping the Niobrara formation was drilled in 2009.

But the cocktail of hydraulic fracturing fluids the oil companies used to drill the wells by the tiny village near the Wyoming border have never been much of a concern for Steve Wolff.

The owner of the Grover Market, one of the only businesses in town, Wolff said the results of frequent drinking-water quality tests are posted on a bulletin board inside his store, but they have never shown any evidence of contamination from hydraulic fracturing fluids or any other chemical involved in oil and gas exploration.

"It's been going on for a long time - not just here, other places," he said of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. "Nobody's said anything or shown any (concern)."

Environmental groups and a federal

advisory board, among many other residents in Colorado and across the country, are concerned about the impacts of fracking. The public outcry about fracking and the media attention it has received are the primary reason Gov. John Hickenlooper announced last week that state oil and gas regulators will develop by year's end a rule requiring oil and gas companies to disclose the full contents of fracking fluid to the public.

Fracking is a method energy companies use to fracture natural gas- or oil-containing rock formations deep underground, often injecting into the well bore hole a mixture of a granular substance and other chemicals thought to contain carcinogens.

When former Gov. Bill Ritter's administration updated the state's oil and gas regulations three years ago, it required energy companies to make a complete listing of fracking fluid chemicals available to medical doctors and state oil and gas regulators upon request. But that

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information is not available to the public.

Though some companies voluntarily report some of the contents of fracking fluid on the online chemical registry www.FracFocus.org, many of the ingredients in fracking fluid are proprietary, and the energy industry has been reluctant to divulge its contents.

Nearly all the oil and gas wells being drilled in Larimer County and the surrounding region, especially those tapping the Niobrara formation, have been fracked, and the ingredient list for the fluids used there is long.

For example, FracFocus, shows that Anadarko Petroleum fracked a well drilled in January near the Promenade Shops at Centerra in Loveland using sand, a proprietary ethoxylated alcohol, a hydrotreated paraffinic solvent, water and a host of other chemicals, some of which are not listed because they are trade secrets.

But, despite that, energy companies are using such chemicals to frack nearly all oil and gas wells these days, and there is not yet any evidence that fracking fluids have contaminated drinking water in Larimer County or heavily drilled Weld County, home to thousands of oil and gas wells, Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission director Dave Neslin said.

No water quality complaints tied to oil and gas development have been made in northern Weld or Larimer counties, he said.

Shining light on fracking

On Thursday, a federal advisory board to U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu released a preliminary report urging the federal government to require more transparency regarding fracking fluids regardless how minor the public health threat of fracking may be.

The Shale Gas Subcommittee of the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board, or SEAB, this week urged the U.S. Department of Energy to take major steps to reduce emissions for natural gas drilling operations, protect water quality by disclosing to the public how ground water is managed at every stage of the oil and natural gas drilling process and fully disclosing to the public the ingredients of fracking fluid.

"The subcommittee shares the prevailing view that the risk of fracturing fluid leakage into drinking water sources through fractures made in deep shale reservoirs is

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remote," the report said. "Nevertheless, the subcommittee believes there is no economic or technical reason to prevent public disclosure of all chemicals in fracturing fluids, with an exception for genuinely proprietary information. While companies and regulators are moving in this direction, progress needs to be accelerated in light of public concern."

Neslin said public concern is the primary reason the Hickenlooper administration is pushing for full transparency for fracking fluids despite its view that the fluids pose little threat to public health.

Public disclosure can build public confidence in the energy industry and allay fears that fracking close to homes and businesses will make people ill, he said.

Informal meetings with people with interests in public disclosure of fracking fluid ingredients have already begun, and the COGCC should make a final move on the fracking transparency rule by the end of the year, he said.

Larimer County environmentalists are keeping an eye on how the rule is being developed, said Gary Wockner, executive director of Save the Poudre and program director for Clean Water Action.

"We believe the jury is still out about the long-term impacts of fracking on Northern Colorado's rivers, groundwater and drinking water supplies," Wockner said. "It is an issue the environmental community is watching closely. Some fracking chemicals

are carcinogenic. With thousands of wells in Weld County, and with more drilling now marching into Larimer County, we all need to be paying attention to this issue to ensure the protection of groundwater, drinking water supplies and our rivers and streams."

For Wolff, new transparency rules are a mixed bag, even though Grover is on the edge of a densely packed and newly drilled oil field.

"I think that would be OK," he said of fracking fluid transparency. "At the same time, we haven't had any problems."

He added: "The more rules and regulations that come into place, the more expensive it's going to be (to drill). It's going to increase costs. When it concerns drinking water, it doesn't matter what the cost is, it just seems to be working here."

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For more information visit:

- » FracFocus fracking fluid registry - www.fracfocus.org
- » U.S. Department of Energy Natural Gas - www.shalegas.energy.gov
- » Colorado state fracking information portal - http://cogcc.state.co.us/Announcements/Hot_Topics/Hydraulic_Fracturing/Hydra_Frac_topics.html

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