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Pa. Allows Frack Water Dumping

Contents of briny solution remain issue for many

January 4, 2011 - By CASEY JUNKINS Staff Writer With AP Dispatches

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WHEELING - At least 3.6 million barrels of briny wastewater left over from hydraulic fracturing operations went to water treatment plants that empty into Pennsylvania's rivers from July 2009 to June 2010, state records indicate.

However, officials with Chesapeake Energy - the company with the most active Marcellus Shale natural gas operations in the Upper Ohio Valley - said they plan to recycle almost all of the water used from fracturing, or "fracking."

During the fracking process, drillers such as Chesapeake, AB Resources and others pump 5 million to 6 million gallons of water, sand and chemicals thousands of feet into the ground with a force as high as 10,000 pounds per square inch. After the rock is fractured, 15-40 percent of the fluid flushes back up through the well.

According to Chesapeake, its most commonly used fracking solution is 0.5 percent chemicals. These include substances found in antifreeze, swimming pool cleaner, deodorant and hair coloring.

Information provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection showing "chemicals used by hydraulic fracturing companies in Pennsylvania for surface and hydraulic fracturing activities" include substances known to cause cancer, liver damage, kidney damage and lung damage. There is no indication Chesapeake uses these substances.

However, Paul Ziemkiewicz said the problem may not be so much what drillers are pumping into the earth; instead, he is concerned about what is flowing back out of the ground.

"We need to be paying as much attention to what comes back up out of the ground as we are to what is going down in the ground," said Ziemkiewicz, director of the West Virginia Water Research Institute at West Virginia University. "There are salts coming back up in fairly high quantities."

An Associated Press study shows this wastewater can be polluted with metals such as barium and strontium.

Additionally, Tracy Bank, assistant professor of geology at the University of Buffalo, recently told a concerned group at the University of Pittsburgh, "Uranium is being mobilized by the fracking process."

The study also found that efforts in the Keystone State to minimize, control and track wastewater discharges from the Marcellus Shale have sometimes failed. The municipal authority that provides drinking water to Beaver Falls, 27 miles northwest of Pittsburgh, began flunking tests for trihalomethanes regularly last year, around the time that a facility 18 miles upstream, Advanced Waste Services, became Pennsylvania's dominant gas wastewater treatment plant.

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Trihalomethanes are not found in drilling wastewater, but there can be a link. The wastewater often contains bromide, which reacts with the chlorine used to purify drinking water. That creates trihalomethanes.

With all of these problems taking place in neighboring Pennsylvania, West Virginians need not worry, according to Chesapeake Director of Corporate Development Stacey Brodak. She has said the company has a goal to eventually recycle all of its fracking water.

According to the website AskChesapeake.com, the company now utilizes a state-of-the-art "Aqua Renew" program to deal with the water.

"This naturally occurring water is generally laden with various minerals and travels from the producing formation through the wellbore to the surface with natural gas during completion (fracking) and production operations," the website notes. "Due to its normally high salt content, reuse in completion operations has been considered impossible by the industry for a long time."

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