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New York Times

In Land of Gas Drilling, Battle for Water That Doesn't Reek or Fizz

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PAVILLION, Wyo. — It has been more than four decades since the first well was drilled in the [natural gas](#) field beneath this stretch of slow rolling alfalfa and sugar beet farms. But for some who live here, in the shadows of the Wind River Mountains, the drilling rigs have brought more than jobs and industry.



Jonathan Crosby for The New York Times

At a meeting in Pavillion, Wyo., state officials and local residents discussed water quality.

For the last few years, a small group of farmers and landowners scattered across this rural Wyoming basin have complained that their water wells have been contaminated with chemicals from a controversial drilling technique known as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

A draft report by the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), issued in December, appeared to confirm their concerns, linking chemicals in local groundwater to gas drilling.

But here on the front lines of the battle over fracking, which has become an increasingly popular technique to extract previously unobtainable reserves of [oil](#) and gas, no conclusion is yet definitive.

After an outcry from Wyoming's governor, Matt Mead, and the energy industry that the federal report was premature and inconclusive, more testing was conducted by the United States Geological Survey and is being processed. The E.P.A. is also in the midst of collecting additional water samples for study.

In the meantime, the state has offered to provide cisterns for local residents, using \$750,000 allocated by the Wyoming Legislature this year. Under the plan, people here would still have to pay a fee to have their water hauled from the nearby community of Pavillion, at a cost that could run more than \$150 per month.

"I'd like to have the industry held accountable for once," said Jeff Locker, a hay and barley farmer who said that his well water had gone bad around the mid-'90s and that the contaminants had contributed to his wife's neuropathy. "We've got scientific proof. And they're still turning their back on us. They expect us to pay between \$100 and \$200 for something we didn't cause. It gets under my skin."

Encana Oil and Gas (U.S.A.) Inc., which bought the Pavillion gas field in 2004 and operates about 125 gas wells in the area, is already providing jugs of drinking water for Mr. Locker and 20 other households. It is unclear whether Encana will defray any of the cost of the cistern water.

"Until there is a peer-reviewed study and a good scientific basis that indicates that the issues related to water are related to our operations, that is not something we are ready to address," said Doug Hock, an Encana spokesman.

Encana has maintained that water in the area is naturally poor and that its operations did not cause the problems — fracking had also occurred before the company purchased the gas field. Moreover, the energy industry has steadfastly pointed out that there has never been any conclusive link between fracking and water contamination.

Mr. Hock said it should have come as no surprise that the E.P.A.'s two monitoring wells showed high levels of methane and benzene because they were drilled deep into a natural gas field.

But some locals say the draft report's analysis of water samples, which identified synthetic chemicals consistent with natural gas drilling and hydraulic fracturing fluids, is proof of what they suspected for years.



Jonathan Crosby for The New York Times

Jeff Locker changes his water filter every three days, saying it turns black in that time because of fracking contaminants

“These are people that had good water,” said John Fenton, a barrel-chested farmer and chairman of the Pavillion Area Concerned Citizens group. “And it changed when there was this rush to come in here and develop the area when they didn’t understand the geology.”

Mr. Fenton said he thought he had dodged a bullet until about three years ago, when his tap water began occasionally fizzing and smelling like petroleum. And even though Encana is giving him drinking water, Mr. Fenton said he and his family still bathe in dirty water.

Renny MacKay, a spokesman for Mr. Mead, said the governor was committed to figuring out a long-term fix for about 20 homes whose water was found to contain contaminants while the source of the pollution is studied.

“The governor believes let’s get more data points, let’s do more science on this that is peer reviewed and whatever the conclusion, you go from there,” he said.

At a meeting at the town high school on Thursday night, state environmental and water officials explained how the cisterns would work to about 50 people in attendance.

Some worried about their property values being deflated because of the attention the water contamination had drawn.

“Most of the property out here is fine,” said Jon Martin, a local landowner. “There’s nothing wrong with it. This is a shallow gas field. When you pass 200 feet, you’re liable to hit natural gas. This isn’t a fracking problem.”

Most residents seemed open to installing cisterns, peppering the officials with questions. How much would it cost? Was this the only option? And what of the additional water samples drawn by the United States Geological Survey, whose results will be released this fall, and the E.P.A.’s draft report and new data, which will be reviewed by an independent panel? For now, there were plenty of unknowns.

Louis Meeks, a landowner whose tap water reeks like diesel fuel, listened quietly. He said he had been trying to clean his water for years to no avail, and no longer lets his granddaughter wash her clothes or bathe in his home. Recently, Mr. Meeks printed business cards for anyone interested in his predicament. A glass of water is pictured prominently.

“Fresh, fizzy ... Fracked,” the cards read.