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Prof: Wells Pose Threat

Fracking lets loose uranium, other hazards

November 20, 2010 - By CASEY JUNKINS

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PITTSBURGH - With the potential to release uranium and other hazardous materials, the process of Marcellus Shale drilling and hydraulic fracturing must be tightly regulated, university professors said Friday.

During the "Health Effects of Shale Gas Extraction" conference at the University of Pittsburgh - located in the city whose council this week unanimously voted to outlaw Marcellus drilling within its boundaries - professors from numerous institutions spoke of the dangers associated with the process.

Jane Clougherty, Pitt professor of environmental and occupational health, also noted some of the rural areas - such as those in Ohio, Marshall, Wetzel and Tyler counties that are seeing increasingly more drilling activity - may be used for the purpose of benefiting big cities.

Many of the instructors, students and concerned residents in attendance heard professors speak on the dangers of both drilling the deep and horizontal wells required for Marcellus extraction, as well as the fracturing, or "fracking," method used to break the shale to release the gas. Tracy Bank, assistant professor of geology at the University of Buffalo in New York, told the group, "Uranium is being mobilized by the fracking process."

"Concentrations are fairly low," she said of uranium's presence in the water used to frack a well. "But they are high enough that it should not be treated like your drinking water."

Though Bank said she does not consider uranium to be radioactive in terms of her research, she noted the element's toxicity can lead to liver and kidney damage in humans.

"Anything coming out of a hole should be tested before it ends up in the water supply," Bank added.

Michel Boufadel, professor of civil and environmental engineering at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pa., said the fracking solution is pumped down into the wells with a force as high as 10,000 pounds per square inch. The fracking cocktail, though mostly water, consists of varying levels of sand and chemicals.

"The brine is six times more concentrated than sea water, and heavier than fresh water," he said of the water left over from fracking.

Dan Bain, assistant professor of geology at Pitt, and Radisav Vidic, professor of environmental engineering at Pitt, expressed concern about drilling for gas in areas throughout West Virginia and Pennsylvania because of the region's great history of coal production.

"Pennsylvania is filled with abandoned coal mines. I don't want to see this happen with gas drilling," Bain said.

"Most of the companies are used to drilling in Texas," Vidic added of firms such as Chesapeake Energy, Range Resources and many others. "They don't have coal mines in Texas."

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An AB Resources well site about 6 miles outside Moundsville's city limits was home to a June 7 explosion, due to workers breaching a pocket of methane in an old coal mine. After injuring several workers, the charge ignited a large fireball that burned for several days.

John Veil, manager and senior scientist at the Argonne National Laboratory, described fracking as "a very violent action" that requires as much as 5 million gallons worth of water for each well.

He noted that most drilling companies now recycle as much of this water as possible.

"Region wide, there is ample water to support the Marcellus drilling," Veil said, though admitting there may be some local problems if too much water is drawn from a single source at any one time.

When one of the audience members then accused him of "representing the industry," Veil responded he now works for the U.S. Department of Energy.

Clougherty said natural gas represents a new opportunity for clean energy use in New York City.

"What presents an environmental hazard at the extraction level presents an opportunity for cities like New York," she said.

Clougherty added increased truck traffic in rural areas results in higher diesel emissions, noting, "Diesel exhaust may make us more susceptible to allergens."

Earlier this year, several Wetzel County residents complained to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection that they believed dust and emissions from shale drilling were making them sick. Department officials, however, said there was no evidence of heavy emissions in the area.

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