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EPA wants companies to reveal chemicals used in controversial gas extraction method

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The federal Environmental Protection Agency has asked eight companies to voluntarily reveal the chemicals they use in hydraulic fracturing, a method used to extract natural gas by injecting fluids into rock formations deep underground.

The practice has drawn a lot of attention after documented cases of drinking-water wells becoming contaminated near sites where the practice, developed by oil-services company Halliburton, was employed.

Industry and federal studies have shown that 20% to 40% of the fluids used in "fracking" remain in the formation. Those chemicals include diesel fuel, which contains benzene ethylbenzene, toluene, xylene, naphthalene and other chemicals; polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons; methanol; formaldehyde; ethylene glycol; glycol ethers; hydrochloric acid; and sodium hydroxide. Congress has granted a wide loophole to companies such as Halliburton, which justify not disclosing the ingredients because of "trade secrets."

The EPA requested the list of chemicals from BJ Services, Complete Production Services, Halliburton, Key Energy Services, Patterson-UTI, PRC Inc., Schlumberger, Superior Well Service and Weatherford.

EPA's request is broad: It wants the companies to provide the locations where hydraulic fracturing was used, what the standard operating procedures are for the method, and any data on environmental effects on human health.

"This scientifically rigorous study will help us understand the potential impacts of hydraulic fracturing on drinking water – a concern that has been raised by Congress and the American people. By sharing information about the chemicals and methods they are using, these companies will help us make a thorough and efficient review of hydraulic fracturing and determine the best path forward," EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson said in a statement Thursday.

"Natural gas is an important part of our nation's energy future, and it's critical that the extraction of this valuable natural resource does not come at the expense of safe water and healthy communities," the statement said. "EPA will do everything in its power, as it is obligated to do, to protect the health of the American people and will respond to demonstrated threats while the study is underway." Hydraulic fracturing and its side effects were the subject of an award-winning documentary, "Gasland," shown recently on HBO.

-- Geoff Mohan

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