

Jackson Pressed For EPA Review Of Drilling Method

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Under questioning from lawmakers, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson told Congress last week that the increased use of hydraulic fracturing by drillers to recover unconventional natural gas and oil deposits is “well worth looking into” despite prior agency decisions not to regulate the practice, which environmentalists say pollutes groundwater by injecting contaminated fluids underground.

Jackson’s statements came in response to queries from Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.) at a May 19 hearing held by the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior.

After the hearing, Hinchey, who is pushing for federal regulation of hydraulic fracturing, issued a press release asserting that Jackson’s statements amounted to a pledge by the Environmental Protection Agency to review the Bush administration’s policy on the drilling practice.

The Bush administration backed the industry’s position that states are doing a good job of regulating the practice and thus federal action is not needed.

“I was extremely pleased that EPA Administrator Jackson recognized the need for the EPA to reexamine the Bush administration’s misguided views on the risks associated with hydraulic fracturing,” said Hinchey.

“It’s imperative that we protect our drinking water supplies from harmful chemicals that are being pumped into the ground by oil and gas companies looking to produce on more and more land in New York and across the country,” added the lawmaker, whose district is near the gas-rich Marcellus Shale formation in the Mid-Atlantic region.

A spokesperson for the EPA confirmed only that Jackson addressed the issue at the hearing, and instead pointed to a transcript of last week’s hearing provided by Congressional Quarterly.

According to the transcript, Jackson—under questioning from Hinchey—said EPA was willing to take a fresh look at hydraulic fracturing, saying at a minimum the agency would be willing to “play a role of starting to track and keep information and data on these issues as they come up.

“I do think that it is well worth looking into,” said Jackson, noting that EPA is currently “forested by law except when there’s, I think, diesel fuel from hydro fracturing.”

Hydraulic fracturing generally involves pumping water and sand into underground rock formations at high pressure in order to open up cracks and seams, making it easier to suck out oil and gas.

Environmentalists say injecting additive-laced water into underground seams despoils groundwater, harms nearby crops and drastically changes the composition of streams and rivers when it flows into these water bodies.

The last time EPA addressed safety issues surrounding hydraulic fracturing was in 2004 under the Bush administration, in which it concluded in a report that fracturing fluids pose a “minimal” threat to underground sources of drinking water—a finding the agency said it based partially on a review of some 200 peer-reviewed publications.

Lawmakers the following year sought to clarify Congress' intent on the issue, including a provision in the Energy Policy Act of 2005 proposing to regulate the practice under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) of 1974. However, Congress rejected that proposal.

But the issue has come to the fore again in response to the recent boom in domestic natural gas development. Hydraulic fracturing has contributed greatly to the nation's fast-developing shale gas fields—particularly those located in the trend-setting Barnett Shale in north Texas and the Bakken Shale in the upper Midwest.

But with the emerging Marcellus Shale expected to become the nation's next big unconventional gas play, fresh concerns about the environmental effects of hydraulic fracturing have begun to be raised by Appalachian residents living in close proximity to shale gas production sites.

The industry insists the practice is safe and Pennsylvania gas producers agreed earlier this year to cooperate with the state's Department of Environmental Protection to explore new ways of re-using or disposing of wastewater generated during the drilling process

However, the Marcellus Shale Committee, a newly formed group jointly sponsored by the Pennsylvania Oil and Gas Association and the Independent Oil and Gas Association of Pennsylvania, on Wednesday announced plans to hold a series of informational public meetings in various Pennsylvania counties to allay such concerns

Another new group—Energy In Depth, a coalition of oil and natural gas trade groups—hammered Jackson for suggesting an EPA review of hydraulic fracturing practices was needed.

“If hydraulic fracturing was unsafe, unregulated and largely unnecessary as a tool of producing American energy, Congress would have good reason to step in...,” said **Energy In Depth spokesman Lee Fuller** in a May 19 statement. “Clearly, that is not the case. And that's why you've seen states from the Southeast to the Intermountain West stand up, shoulder-to-shoulder, and affirm their support for this safe, critical and increasingly valuable well stimulation technology.”

Fuller said state lawmakers in Louisiana, Alabama, North Dakota, Utah, Wyoming, Oklahoma and Texas have taken up or passed resolutions opposing federal regulation of hydraulic fracturing, contending it would impose excessive costs and force the shutdown of many drilling operations.