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Activist slams DEC on drilling

He claims agency files fail to include water contamination cases in western counties

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ALBANY -- The state Department of Environmental Conservation says its records contain no examples of drinking-water contamination from natural gas drilling. But an Ithaca-based environmental researcher claims those records fail to include two decades of county health department cases from the three western counties that are home to most gas wells.

Walter Hang, an anti-drilling activist who runs a company that maps environmental impacts, made his claims in a letter to DEC. He said dozens of county health department reports on water and gas leak problems possibly linked to gas drilling in Allegany, Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties never made it into DEC's records on natural gas safety issues.

DEC is considering new rules for gas drilling to handle the looming natural gas boom in the Marcellus Shale, an ancient underground rock formation that stretches from the Catskills through the Southern Tier and into the Allegany Region and continues into Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

It's not the first time Hang, owner of Toxics Targeting, has confronted the DEC. In November, he said DEC records showed 270 contamination cases linked to drilling, but DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis said that Hang had misinterpreted the records.

In his Friday letter to Grannis, Hang said he found 135 natural gas and oil incidents reported to health officials in Chautauqua County, which is home to about one-fifth of all the oil and gas wells in the state.

Hang said those cases included more than 50 incidents involving brine contamination of private water wells, homes where methane gas seeped inside and drinking water that could be ignited.

None of the incidents were included in a spills database relied upon by DEC to support its claims that there are no cases of drinking water contamination caused by hydrofracking, a new drilling technique that uses a mix of chemicals, sand and water to break apart gas-bearing rock formations deep underground.

A number of environmental groups claim DEC's proposed new rules are too weak to protect water from contamination. Gas companies, along with several property owners groups, said the rules are sufficient, and stricter limits would reduce economic development.

DEC spokesman Yancey Roy said Monday the department would have no comment while it

reviewed Hang's correspondence. In 1985, DEC made the three counties responsible for preliminary investigations into water-well contamination complaints.

An attempt to obtain comment from the New York Independent Oil & Gas Association, a trade group for drilling companies, was not successful.

"DEC knows their records are not complete," Hang said. "Yet for two years, they have been assuring people that they have not had any problems with gas drilling. The counties are passing these cases up, but DEC is not including them. DEC is in denial that these problems can occur."

Hang also cited a July 2004 letter from the Chautauqua County Health Department, in which water resource specialist Bill Boria wrote that the department had "investigated numerous complaints of potential contamination problems resulting from oil- and gas-drilling activities."

Boria wrote that the complaints were for water contaminated by above-ground drilling activities, and "suspected ground water contamination problems resulting from oil and gas drilling activities and hydrofracturing. These complaints that were reported are probably just a fraction of actual problems that occurred."

Officials at the Chautauqua County Health Department said Boria was not available Monday, and that no one else in the department could take a reporter's questions.

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