

EPA Initiates Hydraulic Fracturing Study: Agency seeks input from Science Advisory Board

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WASHINGTON – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that it will conduct a comprehensive research study to investigate the potential adverse impact that hydraulic fracturing may have on water quality and public health. Natural gas plays a key role in our nation’s clean energy future and the process known as hydraulic fracturing is one way of accessing that vital resource. There are concerns that hydraulic fracturing may impact ground water and surface water quality in ways that threaten human health and the environment. To address these concerns and strengthen our clean energy future and in response to language inserted into the fiscal year 2010 Appropriations Act, EPA is re-allocating \$1.9 million for this comprehensive, peer-reviewed study for FY10 and requesting funding for FY11 in the president’s budget proposal.

“Our research will be designed to answer questions about the potential impact of hydraulic fracturing on human health and the environment,” said Dr. Paul T. Anastas, assistant administrator for EPA’s Office of Research and Development. “The study will be conducted through a transparent, peer-reviewed process, with significant stakeholder input.”

EPA is in the very early stages of designing a hydraulic fracturing research program. The agency is proposing the process begin with (1) defining research questions and identifying data gaps; (2) conducting a robust process for stakeholder input and research prioritization; (3) with this input, developing a detailed study design that will undergo external peer-review, leading to (4) implementing the planned research studies.

To support this initial planning phase and guide the development of the study plan, the agency is seeking suggestions and comments from the EPA Science Advisory Board (SAB)—an independent, external federal advisory committee. The agency has requested that the Environmental Engineering Committee (EEC) of the SAB evaluate and provide advice on EPA’s proposed approach. The agency will use this advice and extensive stakeholder input to guide the design of the study.

Hydraulic fracturing is a process that drills vertical and horizontal cracks underground that help withdraw gas, or oil, from coalbeds, shale and other geological formations. While each site is unique, in general, the process involves vertical and horizontal drilling, taking water from the ground, injecting fracturing fluids and sands into the formation, and withdrawing gas and separating and managing the leftover waters.

A federal register notice was issued March 18, announcing a SAB meeting April 7-8.

More information on hydraulic fracturing: http://www.epa.gov/ogwdw000/uic/wells_hydrofrac.html

More information on the SAB and the supporting documents: <http://www.epa.gov/sab>