

3042

RECEIVED
IRRC

Statement on Proposed Changes to Chapter 78 Oil & Gas Rules

Submitted by Karen Feridun, Founder, Berks Gas Truth on January 9, 2014

2014 JAN 22 PM 3:54

I'm founder of Berks Gas Truth, a grassroots organization opposed to fracking. We would like to see it banned outright. Having said that, natural gas drilling is profoundly negatively impacting our health, our communities, our natural resources, and our economy right now, so I urge the DEP to approve the most stringent rules possible in order to carry out its mission of providing protection.

I urge the Board to extend the comment period to at least 120 days to allow more Pennsylvanians' voices to be heard. In addition, I urge you to schedule more hearings. Currently, only five of the seven counties where hearings are scheduled are located in the drilling region. Some of the most drilled counties have been passed over, making it difficult to impossible for people to attend a hearing.

I support all of the comments Tracy Carluccio made in her statement. I'd like to spend the remainder of my time addressing the issue of orphaned and abandoned wells, specifically.

A study on well-capping out of Carnegie Mellon cites a DEP report issued before Marcellus drilling had come to Pennsylvania that said it would take 160 years, at 2004 funding levels, to cap all of the orphaned and abandoned wells it knew about at the time.ⁱ This paper doesn't mention the number of wells DEP had in mind when it calculated that figure. A different paper from the DEP called Pennsylvania's Plan for Addressing Problem Abandoned Wells and Orphaned Wells from 2000 says this:

In the 140 years since the first oil well was drilled, an unknown number of oil and gas wells have been drilled in Pennsylvania. An estimate by the Independent Petroleum Association of America places that number at approximately 325,000. DEP has records of 88,300 operating wells which it regulates, 44,700 plugged wells, and approximately 8,000 orphaned and abandoned wells. The status of the remaining 184,000 wells is unknown. Many wells were drilled, operated, and plugged at the end of their useful life while others were drilled, operated and abandoned without proper plugging. Some wells were "temporarily abandoned" while the operators waited for the price of oil to rise to a level which would make producing the wells profitable; this sometimes never occurred.ⁱⁱ

In an article on o&a wells from May 2013 was this quote from Bill Pine, Chief of the Subsurface Activity Section of the DEP:

Well drilling began in 1859 in Pennsylvania and it's a safe bet the very first well abandoned in Pennsylvania was in 1859. We have thousands of abandoned oil and gas wells in the Commonwealth. I don't think anyone has an accurate record of how many really exist.ⁱⁱⁱ

Later in the DEP document, it says,

Since the well plugging program began, 108 wells have been plugged at a cost of over \$2.4 million using funds from the Abandoned Well Plugging Fund, the Orphaned Well Plugging Fund, and a Federal Clean Water Act, Section 319 Non-Point Source (319 NPS) grant.^{iv}

So there are a number of different funding sources to pay for capping wells. The Section 319 grant was used to cap wells to stop discharges of acid mine drainage. The Abandoned Well Plugging Fund was established in 1984. The Orphaned Well Plugging Fund was established in 1992. In the 16 years that funding was available prior to the publication of this paper, only 108 wells were capped.

Rick Steiner, a retired University of Alaska professor and marine conservation specialist, says "The oil industry has this term 'permanently plugged wells,' but nobody knows what that means over time. They have completely unreliable expectations for some really basic technology. They plug wells with concrete. Just look at your sidewalks. Pour a fresh sidewalk, wait a few years, and it's cracking and heaving. That's what happens to concrete. But nobody wants to admit this could possibly be going on with oil well plugs. And this isn't just a problem here in America. If we have millions of abandoned wells here, just imagine the scope of the problem globally."^v

We have failed to deal with the hundreds of thousands of o&a wells. We're only adding to that sad legacy with the thousands of wells the oil & gas industry has drilled in Pennsylvania since 2003.

The National Petroleum Council's North American Resource Development Study from 2011 cites barriers to progress on this issue – lack of research and lack of long-term vision.^{vi}

We have no plan for managing this going forward. We have no idea how we're going to manage all the wells in our state long-term. Priority needs to be given to addressing this issue -- to giving the public an honest assessment of the debt we're incurring to allow drillers come here and destroy our natural resources and communities, to researching and implementing the best safety procedures for managing wells long-term, to getting a handle on exactly how many wells are out there and where they are, and to getting the wells properly capped. And if you're going to keep permitting wells in this state, then the industry making a fortune on the backs of Pennsylvanians should be responsible for surveying before they drill, sharing what they find publicly, and capping wells according to the most rigorous safety standards.

ⁱ http://www.hydrorelief.org/frackdata/new_nov/Mitchell2011_pluggingwells.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://www.elibrary.dep.state.pa.us/dsweb/Get/Document-48262/550-0800-001.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://ecohearth.com/eco-zine/green-issues/1609-abandoned-leaking-oil-wells-natural-gas-well-leaks-disaster.html>

^{iv} <http://www.elibrary.dep.state.pa.us/dsweb/Get/Document-48262/550-0800-001.pdf>

^v <http://ecohearth.com/eco-zine/green-issues/1609-abandoned-leaking-oil-wells-natural-gas-well-leaks-disaster.html>

^{vi} http://www.npc.org/Prudent_Development-Topic_Papers/2-25_Well_Plugging_and_Abandonment_Paper.pdf