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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

CANADA NEWS | October 10, 2012, 10:30 p.m. ET

New EPA Findings Test Fracking Site

By TENNILLE TRACY

New tests of water surrounding natural-gas-drilling sites near Pavillion, Wyo., have turned up results that are "generally consistent" with earlier findings showing a link between contamination and hydraulic fracturing, the Environmental Protection Agency said Wednesday.

The EPA's announcement could be a blow to natural-gas company Encana Corp., which operates the Pavillion gas field and has routinely denied any link between its drilling and compounds found in the EPA's two monitoring wells.

Encana says the EPA drilled its wells into a gas zone, which explains the presence of hydrocarbons. The company also says the EPA has drawn improper conclusions from its data.

"EPA has provided no sound scientific evidence that drilling has impacted domestic drinking-water wells in the area," Encana spokesman Doug Hock said.

Though the EPA has stressed Pavillion is unique and that any evidence of contamination there shouldn't be used as an indictment of hydraulic fracturing everywhere, these tests could fuel concerns about hydraulic fracturing, dubbed "fracking," and the risk it potentially poses to groundwater supplies.

The EPA said Wednesday it would accept comments on its draft findings until January, extending a deadline that was slated to expire in October.

Fracking involves a high-pressure mix of water, sand and chemicals injected underground to break open seams in the earth and unlock natural-gas supplies. Fracking paved the way for a boom of U.S. natural-gas production, but opponents say the drilling method contaminates groundwater and allows greenhouse gases to escape into the atmosphere.

Encana and others in the natural-gas industry say the method is safe if conducted properly.

The definitive word on the issue should be coming from the EPA, which is doing a years-long analysis of the risks.

Pavillion has become one of the most closely watched natural-gas sites in the country. The EPA started to monitor the area after residents complained about the smell and taste of their water. Late last year, the agency made headlines when it said synthetic compounds in its monitoring wells appeared to be

EPAPAV0032516

linked to natural-gas production.

It was a rare instance of a federal agency saying it had evidence of contamination.

The EPA and the U.S. Geological Survey conducted another round of testing this year after Encana and some energy experts criticized the agency's work. The USGS released its test results in September.

Although the EPA said those results also were "generally consistent" with its original analysis, Encana has pointed out several differences.EPA spokeswoman Alisha Johnson said the agency's new data and the USGS data are both "generally consistent" with the monitoring data the agency released last year.

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A version of this article appeared October 11, 2012, on page A3 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: New EPA Findings Test Fracking Site.

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