

DEP chief seeks tougher oversight of Marcellus Shale drilling

Thursday, June 17, 2010

By Tom Barnes, Post-Gazette Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG -- The state's top environmental official wants the state Legislature to enact laws to reinforce his regulatory power to control safety at Marcellus Shale drilling sites.

John Hanger, secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection, told the Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee Wednesday that putting his powers into law would protect the state from potential lawsuits challenging his authority. That is particularly true as Marcellus Shale drilling expands throughout the state, he said.

Mr. Hanger said he will submit a list of amendments to the state's Oil and Gas Act "to make it clear that the department can withhold permits from companies that act in an unsafe manner."

The agency continues to hire more inspectors to check the growing number of natural gas wells being drilled by the expanding Marcellus Shale industry. So far there are 167 inspectors, with the number to top 190 in several months. The extra staffing is paid by increased permit fees for drillers. So far, 3,800 permits for wells have been issued, with drilling begun at 1,500 sites. They are needed as gas well drilling increases across the state, especially in western and northcentral Pennsylvania.

In a few more years, Pennsylvania will likely be producing 10 percent of all the natural gas produced in the U.S., Mr. Hanger said, because of the huge amount of gas in the widespread Marcellus Shale areas throughout the state.

As the Marcellus gas industry expands, Mr. Hanger said he has made safety in drilling the deep underground wells a top priority for the department and repeatedly tells the gas industry that safety should be its top goal, too.

"We've told the industry that safety can't be sacrificed, and not to allow profit to trump safety," he said. "There will be serious consequences if safety is lax."

Since January, Mr. Hanger said, DEP has completed almost 1,700 inspections of Marcellus Shale drilling sites in the state and has found 530 violations, some of them he called "troubling" and "reasons for concern." DEP inspectors found 638 violations in all of 2009.

Some of the problems, he said, pertain to "improperly constructed or maintained drilling waste and flowback containment pits at 29 of the 364 Marcellus Shale wells drilled this year," he said.

One serious incident the agency is investigating is the June 3 gas well "blowout" in Clearfield County, an incident he said narrowly missed being a catastrophe. A report on that incident should be finished next month, he said.

"There were no injuries [in Clearfield County] but it was a dangerous situation," he said. "It was a near-miss. We were lucky there wasn't ignition" of the gas that escaped.

Several committee members asked what had caused the blowout at the EOG Resources Inc. well, which sent an uncontrolled stream of natural gas and polluted drilling waste water spouting 75 feet into the air for 16 hours, before it was finally capped on June 4.

Mr. Hanger said he has hired a natural gas expert with 27 years experience to head up the department's probe and didn't want to speculate on the cause based on preliminary information. When the report comes out, he said, "There will be a full understanding of what went wrong and what needs to change to prevent such an incident from happening again."

In a related matter, Mr. Hanger said DEP has checked drilling operations at seven Marcellus Shale drilling sites in Pennsylvania being done by Union Drilling Co., the company that was working at a West Virginia well that exploded June 7, and has found no violations.

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First published on June 17, 2010 at 12:00 am

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