

EPA Puts the Public Eye on Drilling
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Broader View Weekly, February 4, 2010

Last week the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced the creation of a new “Eyes on Drilling” tip line. This tip line was created for citizens to report non-emergency suspicious activity related to oil and natural gas development that they observe. EPA spokesman David Sternberg said that although the announcement came from Region 3, they will take calls from people anywhere in the country and act as a clearinghouse.

The toll free tip line number is 1-877-919-4EPA. EPA asks that citizens who observe what appears to be illegal disposal of wastes or other suspicious activity call in specific information (see sidebar) about the incident. People may also send reports by email to eyesondrilling@epa.gov, and those who don't wish to identify themselves may provide tips anonymously.

In some cases a spill or release of hazardous material, including oil, presents an emergency. In those cases people should call the National Response Center at 1-800-424-8802 for emergencies.

In comments to the press, the EPA explained that the tip line grew out of the increased public concern about environmental impacts of oil and natural gas drilling over the past few months. The agency noted that a lot of this concern is particularly focused on the development of Marcellus Shale.

Even though the EPA doesn't grant permits for oil and gas drilling operations – in New York it's the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) that grants drilling permits – there are a number of EPA regulations that apply to the storage of petroleum products and drilling fluids. The agency is also very concerned about the proper disposal of waste products, as well as protecting air and water resources in areas where gas activities occur.

By providing a drilling hotline, EPA officials hope to gain a better understanding of what people are experiencing and observing as a result of drilling activities. The information, they say, may also come in useful in investigating industry practices.

While the technology used to extract natural gas from Marcellus Shale has made recovering the gas more profitable, EPA noted that these technologies also provide additional opportunities for spills. Hydraulic fracturing (fracking) requires pumping millions of gallons of highly pressurized water, sand, and chemicals into the wells to break the shale apart. About 20 to 30 percent of the fluid flows back to the surface.

While some of these fluids are recycled for reuse in the fracking process, millions of gallons of wastewater are transported off the well site for disposal. EPA noted that spills can occur during the storing and transporting of wastewater as well as from chemicals

stored at the well site. These spills, the agency told the press, can result in the contamination of surface water or ground water that is used for drinking water.

Sidebar: How to Report a spill

Accidental releases of petroleum, toxic chemicals, gases, and other hazardous materials, even relatively small releases, have the potential to endanger public health and contaminate groundwater, surface water, and soils.

You can report a spill within NY State to the NYS Spill Hotline by calling 1-800-457-7362.

You can report dumping and other illegal or suspicious hauling and/or disposal activities related to gas and oil drilling to the EPA by calling 877-919-4372 (877-919-4EPA). You may also e-mail reports to eyesondrilling@epa.gov or send a written note to EPA Region 3, 1650 Arch Street (3CEOO), Philadelphia, PA 19103-2029.

Regardless of who you contact, you'll need to record some information about the event. To the extent possible try to record:

- ~ the location of the event
- ~the date of the event
- ~ the time of the event
- ~ who, if anyone you interacted with during the event

Photos and videos are great ways to document observations, but be sure to record the date and time the photo or video was taken. EPA will accept digital copies as well as prints, cassettes or CD-ROM disks.

Also, when you are describing what you observed, try to include:

- ~ information about the activity taking place, including description of equipment and materials involved
- ~ a description of vehicles (color, type of vehicle, company name or logo, license plate number)
- ~ where material was discharged (physical location and stream name, if known)
- ~any environmental impacts you see: discoloration, dying vegetation, dead fish or other wildlife