

More Inspectors and Regulations for Pennsylvania Gas Wells

Only a fraction of well sites inspected in 2009; 678 violations found

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On Thursday, January 28 Pennsylvania Governor Edward Rendell announced that the state would step up its actions to protect residents and environment from the impact of increased natural gas exploration across the state.

Governor Rendell has directed the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to hire 68 new well inspectors who will join the more than 100 currently on staff. Funding for the new positions will come from money generated by new, higher well permit fees that were instituted in 2009

Rendell also directed DEP to strengthen oil and gas regulations to improve well construction standards. Specifically, he said the new regulations will: raise standards for well casings and pipes; require drilling companies to restore or replace water supplies they pollute; require well operators to inspect every existing well quarterly and report the results of those inspections to DEP; and require lower well pressures.

“Interest in Pennsylvania’s Marcellus Shale formation is greater than ever before,” Rendell told the press. “The industry has told us that they expect to apply for 5,200 permits to drill in the Marcellus Shale this year – nearly three times the number of permits we issued in all of 2009.”

Last year DEP performed 14,544 drill site inspections – a fraction of the more than 120,000 active wells across the state – and took 678 enforcement actions against drillers for violations. In early January the DEP fined Pennsylvania-based Atlas Resources for violations at 13 wells, including spills of fracturing fluids and other contaminants onto the ground around the sites. These spills are significant because they happened repeatedly during what has been characterized as “routine transfer of fluids”.

Later in the month DEP fined M.R. Dirt, a company that removes waste from drilling sites, \$6,000 for spilling more than seven tons of drilling dirt along a public road. In December the DEP fined Chesapeake and Schlumberger for hydrochloric acid spills.

In November Cabot Oil and Gas was fined for a series of spills, including a fracturing fluid spill. And the month before that, DEP fined Texas-based Range Resources \$23,500 for spilling nearly 5,000 gallons of wastewater, including hydraulic fracturing fluids, into a tributary of Cross Creek Lake, a protected watershed near Pittsburgh.

The new draft regulations, developed through open meetings with industry experts, are available for public comment before going through DEP’s formal rulemaking process. For more information, visit DEP website at www.depweb.state.pa.us. To read the proposed rules go

to <http://www.dep.state.pa.us/dep/deputate/minres/oilgas/Oil%20&%20Gas%20Documents/CHAPTER%2078%20Revisions%20January%2027%202010.pdf>