

## Marcellus Wells Blowout in PA, WV

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The past week was a tough one for companies drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus shale. Around 8:30pm on June 3, a well blew out near Moshannon State Forest in Clearfield County, Pennsylvania. It took 16 hours to control the spill and cap the well. Then not four days later, on June 7, another Marcellus well blew near Moundsville, West Virginia, just south of Pittsburgh.

### **Close to Home**

Drive southwest three to four hours and you'll end up near Lawrence Township in Clearfield County, PA. It's a rural area, forested, sprinkled with small towns and Marcellus well pads, and these days, media vans trying to get some footage of the blowout.

EOG Resources (formerly Enron Oil & Gas) operates approximately 265 active wells in Pennsylvania, 117 of which are in the Marcellus Shale formation. They had already completed three successful wells on a multi-well pad located near Moshannon State Forest, and were working on a fourth. The well pad is located just off McGeorge Road, about 10 miles north of Interstate 80 on land owned by a private hunting club. On Thursday the crew lost control of the well, and natural gas and drilling wastewater sprayed 75 feet into the air and spilled onto the ground until lunchtime the next day.

At first, media reported that up to a million gallons of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) fluid had spilled, but three days later they revised their estimate to somewhere near 35,000 gallons.

“One million gallons of water were used in the fracking process,” said Tom Rathbun, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) spokesman. “But we estimate that closer to 35,000 gallons of fracking fluid – and brine – actually came back out.” DEP bases these estimates on industry calculations and what they have observed in the past. But, he cautioned, DEP is just beginning its investigation and he expects they'll know more in the next few days.

PA Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) and DEP responded to the accident site, along with special crews from Texas. According to Rathbun, the cleanup crews used booms to contain the water and vacuumed it into holding tanks. DEP took soil samples and has sent them to be analyzed.

When DEP investigators arrived on the scene, they found natural gas and frack fluid flowing off the well pad and toward tributaries to Little Laurel Run. Although the fracking fluid and other drilling waste fluid did not reach any streams, DEP is concerned about the potential impacts on groundwater. “DEP is continuing to monitor a spring close by,” Rathbun said.

“The event at the well site could have been a catastrophic incident that endangered life and property,” DEP Secretary John Hanger told the press. “This was not a minor accident, but a serious incident that will be fully investigated by this agency with the appropriate and necessary actions taken quickly.” Hanger promised that his agency will

“aggressively look at this situation and see where things went wrong and what enforcement action is necessary. If mistakes were made, we will be certain to take steps to prevent similar errors from happening again,” he said.

One question DEP has already raised is whether a faulty blowout preventer contributed to the accident. A blowout preventer is a series of valves that sit atop gas and oil wells and allow workers to control the pressure inside. The failure of a blowout preventer is one of the causes of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. But, said Rathbun, EOG claimed they successfully tested the blowout preventer on Wednesday, prior to installing it in the well.

AP journalists and others have been prevented from going onto the accident site, limiting coverage to interviews from industry and DEP spokespersons. The problem, Rathbun explained, is that the well is located on private land, and DEP cannot grant media access. PEMA also blocked access during the initial cleanup because of the risk of explosion.

### **West Virginia Blowout**

Drive southwest from Moshannon State Forest about three hours and you reach Moundsville, West Virginia. Seven workers from BJ Tubular Services, of Houston, Texas, and Union Drilling, a West Virginia firm, were working on the well when it exploded at 1am on Monday, June 7. A column of fire shot 70 feet into the sky when rig workers, drilling through an old coal mine, hit a pocket of gas. According to WV DEP, the drillers had begun work only two days earlier and had not reached the depth at which a blowout preventer is required.

The well is owned by Texas-based Chief Oil & Gas LLC, a company that had drilled 60 Marcellus wells in Pennsylvania and another 15 in West Virginia without any incident, according to a company spokesperson.