

EPA links fracking to groundwater pollution in Wyoming

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Written by [William Moyer](#)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced for the first time Thursday that hydraulic fracturing may be to blame for causing groundwater pollution. And predictably, the reaction in the Southern Tier fell along the long-held beliefs of [environmentalists](#) and pro-drillers.

In announcing its findings, the EPA said chemicals likely associated with hydro-fracturing were detected in the groundwater beneath Pavillion, a small community in central Wyoming, where residents had claimed their well water reeked of chemicals. Health officials advised residents last year not to drink the water after the EPA detected low levels of hydrocarbons in their wells.

Upon hearing the news, local anti-drilling advocates immediately raised "I told you so" [red flags](#), while an elected official and landowner urged caution before jumping to conclusions when little is known about the Wyoming incident.

"I'm sure the opposition to drilling will try to run with this," said Marchie Diffendorf, a Kirkwood landowner and Broome County legislator. "Lots of questions need to be answered. What were the techniques? Casings? Cementings? What precautions were taken to prevent pollution?"

The federal report emphasized the findings were specific to Pavillion, saying the fracking that occurred in Pavillion differed from methods used elsewhere with different geological characteristics, including the Marcellus Shale.

The fracking in Pavillion occurred below the level of the drinking water aquifer and close to water wells, according to the EPA. Elsewhere, drilling is remote and fracking occurs deeper than the level of groundwater.

Still, the fact the finding comes from the federal agency entrusted with protecting [the environment](#) is cause enough for concern, regardless of differences between Wyoming and the Marcellus Shale, according to anti-drilling advocates.

"(EPA) certainly lends a lot of credence to the claim that we need to investigate this much more deeply than we have," said David Currie, director of the Binghamton Regional Sustainability Coalition. "One would hope that the industry reacts positively in the sense that they begin to correct the most egregious of their mistakes."

EPA officials said their announcement is the first step in a process of opening its findings for review by the public and other scientists.

"EPA's highest priority remains ensuring that Pavillion residents have access to [safe](#) drinking water," said Jim Martin, a regional administrator in Denver. "We look forward to having these findings in the draft report informed by a transparent and public review process."

An energy company official said Thursday the highly localized report from Wyoming cannot be used as an all-inclusive condemnation of proposed fracking in New York state.

"Those opposed to drilling always say whenever something goes wrong we should not drill in New York," said Dennis Holbrook, of Norse Energy's field office in Norwich. "There's thousands of wells without problems. Too many examples are taken out of context against drilling."

Encana, of Canada, owns the Pavillion gas field. An announced \$45 million sale to Midland, Texas-based [Legacy](#) Reserves fell through last month amid concerns about the EPA investigation.

Encana spokesman Doug Hock questioned the report.

"Those (contaminants) could just have likely been brought about by contamination in their sampling process or [construction](#) of their well," Hock said.

EPA officials knew the Wyoming report would reverberate to the Southern Tier, arguably ground zero of New York's debate on hydro-fracking.

Some upstate residents and politicians argue the gas industry will bring desperately needed jobs, while others demand a ban on fracking to protect water supplies. Department of [Environmental Conservation](#) regulators are yet to decide whether to issue permits for gas drilling with high-volume hydraulic fracturing.

Two highly outspoken local opponents predicted the Wyoming report would play a role in the regional debate.

"We had an industry running around saying there's never been a case of pollution," said Wes Gillingham, director of Catskill Mountainkeeper. "We knew they'd find chemical in ground water ... It's very significant in debunking the line that industry has been using to say it's safe."

Agreed, said Walter Hang, an Ithaca-based anti-drilling advocate.

"It's very, very useful that EPA is now urging caution about going forward without adequate safeguards," Hang said. "Similar things could happen if New York state approves drilling; groundwater could be polluted."

Associated Press writers Mead Gruver, Colleen Slevin and Mary Esch contributed to this report.