

Secrecy over fracking chemicals clouds environmental risks, advocates say

Despite a report that links practice to contaminated drinking water, list of more than 1,076 chemicals used during fracking process remains unknown to public

By Rose Hackman in New York
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The fracking industry must be compelled to provide far more detailed information to regulators if the public is to be accurately informed of any risks to the environment, advocacy groups say.

A report by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) last month found that hydraulic fracturing for oil and gas can lead, and has led, to the contamination of drinking water. It was the first time the federal government had admitted such a link.

The study, based on “data sources available to the agency”, found levels of any contamination to be small compared to the number of wells across the country, the EPA said.

But Gretchen Goldman, a lead analyst at the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union for Concerned Scientists, told the Guardian that the EPA’s study – which is now open for comment – was nothing “more than a literature review” and called for the industry to be required to divulge greater data.

Goldman says the EPA backed down from its initial promise to undertake prospective studies, which would have involved following a well site and testing its waters before, during and after fracking activities had begun. Such a study would have shed objective light on the fracking process and pushed scientific knowledge forward, she says.

Information shared by the industry for the report was very often done on a voluntary basis, the authors reveal, and even when companies were forced to share information through state regulations, they were still allowed to withhold details deemed crucial to

their business.

One of the most notable elements of fracking that continues to be shrouded in secrecy, for instance, is the identity and mixture of chemicals that are injected into the ground through wells, together with water, at high intensity to fracture underground rocks and release oil or gas.

The chemical composition of such injections appears to vary from company to company and well to well.

Even if the EPA was able to compile a list of 1,076 chemicals used in the fracking process, the list is incomplete, with businesses involved in fracking able to cite some components as amounting to confidential business information, and therefore not subject to release to the public, the report indicates.

This means that the report is not void of influence from the oil and gas industry, Amy Mall, a senior policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said.

In the 998-page draft, the word “limitation” is used 76 times, “uncertainty” 43 times and “insufficient” – as it relates to insufficient information, data or evidence – is used seven times.

The EPA declined requests for interview about the fracking report.

Despite opposition from some groups, fracking is largely supported by the Obama administration. President Barack Obama has repeatedly described fracking as a transitional fuel, bridging a path away from fossil fuels and towards a clean energy future – something

environmentalists say is both inaccurate and naive.

In 2005 lobbying efforts by the oil and gas industry proved successful, with hydraulic fracturing activities exempted from certain sections of the Safe Drinking Water Act, including permit application.

Last week another federal agency, the Bureau of Land Management, was temporarily blocked by a US district judge from putting into effect a new set of rules for fracking on federal public land.

The rules, which would have come into effect on 24 June, would have required oil and gas companies to reveal the chemicals they inject into the ground for fracking purposes, to meet construction standards when drilling wells, and to dispose of contaminated water safely.

But on Tuesday, judge Scott Skavdahl granted a stay to the new rules until 22 July, according to the Independent Petroleum Association of America (IPAA), which said the judge’s decision on a preliminary injunction sought by IPAA and other opponents of the rules was now expected in mid-August, Reuters reported.

IPAA and the Western Energy Alliance were joined by Colorado, Wyoming, North Dakota and Utah in seeking to stop the new rules from taking effect.