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'Fracking' Deemed Eco-Safe at Hearing

by Jim Myers | Tulsa World, Okla. | Thursday, April 14, 2011

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Oklahoma Corporation Commissioner Jeff Cloud told key U.S. senators that his agency's record on protecting water from pollution makes it clear that states, not the federal government, should regulate hydraulic fracturing.

The decades-old practice has helped spark a natural-gas boom in parts of the country, along with growing controversy.

"During more than half a century of hydraulic fracturing experience, there has not been a single documented instance of contamination to groundwater or drinking water as a result of hydraulic fracturing," Cloud told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

That record, he said, covers more than 100,000 wells in Oklahoma.

Cloud's testimony triggered praise from an unlikely source, Sen. Ben Cardin, D-Md., who not only led the hearing into natural-gas drilling and public health but who also represents a state that has imposed a moratorium on "fracking operations."

Cardin was critical of both the industry, which he accused of failing to meet even minimally acceptable performance levels for protecting human health, and regulatory agencies that in his view also have failed to do what is necessary to protect drinking water supplies.

What especially impressed Cardin was Cloud's explanation that Oklahoma requires the fluids used in fracking to be either recycled or injected into wells.

Cloud repeatedly offered assurances that those fluids never get into the state's water.

Cardin urged other states to follow Oklahoma's lead.

"I think we need to learn from best practices, and we have seen some of that catch on from other states," he said, also citing the record in Colorado.

In some areas, the fluids reportedly are taken to municipal wastewater treatment plants.

Sen. Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, the committee's top Republican and a key player on environmental issues in Congress, also welcomed Cloud's testimony about the state's "long and successful history of regulating hydraulic fracturing."



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"Oklahoma has long been a leader in natural gas production, and hydraulic fracturing plays a key role in providing affordable domestic energy," Inhofe said.

Tuesday's hearing came as natural gas is generating more attention, both negative and positive, as an alternative to oil as a transportation fuel. Rising oil prices and an abundance of domestic natural gas have sparked the interest of politicians, but environmental concerns accompanying the gas boom have prompted states like Maryland and New York to step back from increased drilling activity.

Sen. Robert Casey, D-Pa., is sponsoring legislation to repeal the so-called loophole for the industry and require the disclosure of chemicals used in fracking.

Casey admitted that for decades his state did not take the correct approach to regulating coal mining. Today, he said, "we have to get it right on natural gas."

According to Cardin, who cited a number of violations, and statements from others at the hearing, Pennsylvania is still struggling when it comes to regulation.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also did not escape critical questions, especially concerning its take on the use of diesel fuel in fracking and whether firms that use diesel fuel must apply for a permit.

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