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Department of Energy Report Indicates Fracking Has Not Contaminated Drinking Water in Western Pennsylvania

A recent study by the Department of Energy's National Energy Technology Laboratory (NETL) indicates that chemical-laced fluids used in hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, have not contaminated the drinking water at a test drill site in western Pennsylvania. Fracking, a technique used to extract natural gas trapped deep underground, has resulted in the boom in new gas wells being drilled in recent years, many in the Marcellus Shale formation that lies under parts of Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio and West Virginia. Opponents of fracking have claimed that the chemicals used in the drilling process could spread to drinking water supplies.

Throughout the year-long study, NETL researchers seismically monitored eight new horizontal wells in the Marcellus Shale formation situated underneath Pennsylvania, as well as several older wells located approximately 3,000 feet above the Marcellus Shale. NETL researchers also injected artificial "tracers" into drilling fluids, which were subsequently injected more than 8,000 feet below the surface, so they could monitor the fracking fluid injected into a natural gas well and see where it traveled. None of the tracers were subsequently detected in the monitoring zone 3,000 feet higher. The NETL report concluded that potentially toxic chemicals were at least a mile removed from potential drinking water supplies, which typically are no more than 500 feet underground.

The NETL's research findings are significant because the natural gas industry and environmental regulators have long contended that fracking itself does not contaminate surface drinking water due to the depth of the gas wells. Most natural gas wells are more than a mile underground, while drinking water aquifers are usually within 500 to 1,000 feet of the surface. While the study is considered a small victory for the natural gas industry, the NETL has been quick to emphasize that the results of the study are preliminary, and the study is still ongoing. In a July 19, 2013 statement, the NETL reported that it is "still in the early stages of collecting, analyzing, and validating data [from the study].... While nothing of concern has been found thus far, the results are far too preliminary to make any firm claims." A final report on the NETL's results is expected by the end of this calendar year.



If you have any questions about this Legal Alert, please feel free to contact any of the attorneys listed below or the Sutherland attorney with whom you regularly work.

Authors

[Marc A. Rawls](#)

404.853.8058

marc.rawls@sutherland.com

[Daniella Landers](#)

713.470.6110

daniella.landiers@sutherland.com

[M. Hill Jeffries](#)

404.853.8137

hill.jeffries@sutherland.com

Related Attorneys

[Robert E. Copps](#)

212.389.5045

robert.copps@sutherland.com

[Thomas C. Herman](#)

404.853.8089

tom.herman@sutherland.com

[Christina B. Rissler](#)

404.853.8041

christina.rissler@sutherland.com

[David A. Zimmerman](#)

404.853.8507

david.zimmerman@sutherland.com

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