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Environmental and Citizens Groups Take DEP Water Testing Concerns to House Democratic Policy Committee

Washington, PA –State Representative Jesse White is hosting a House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing in Washington County today to examine the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's (PA DEP) policies and procedures related to air and water quality testing on landowners' and leaseholders' properties in Pennsylvania.

“One way or another, DEP is going to have to disclose what is now being hidden -- including full well water test results, quality control data, and the procedures and policies that drive their process of determining if drilling has polluted a resident's well. This hearing is shining a spotlight on these issues in an attempt to open up DEP's closed door policies regarding how water pollution from gas is investigated, analyzed and reported. We applaud and support Rep. White's efforts on behalf of the public's health and safety,” said Tracy Carluccio, Deputy Director, Delaware Riverkeeper Network.

A coalition of environmental organizations has been working over the past months to obtain answers from DEP regarding questions and concerns they and the public have about this issue. In November, the coalition sent a letter to Governor Tom Corbett and Secretary Michael Krancer criticizing the PA DEP's water testing and notification policies as outdated, lacking transparency, and inadequate to protect residents and drinking water from pollution caused by gas drilling. The coalition called for immediate reform of PA DEP's procedures and for all DEP water test data to be reported to households where testing has occurred but where only a fraction of the test results were reported.

Following Secretary Krancer's reply to the letter, a meeting to discuss these issues was scheduled for January 24th between representatives of the signatory organizations and the PA DEP's Oil and Gas Division and Bureau of Laboratories. However, PA DEP abruptly cancelled the meeting they initiated, prompting the coalition to send another letter to Secretary Krancer expressing their dissatisfaction with PA DEP's decision and requesting a response to a submitted list of pressing questions which the public needs answers to. It is still not clear whether DEP will respond to the submitted questions or reschedule the meeting with all the signatory organizations.

“The information obtained so far raises grave concerns about whether DEP is doing its job in protecting homeowners. How can a homeowner make a judgment whether his water is safe to drink if only partial lab test results are being provided?” said Thomas Au, Conservation Chair for Pennsylvania Sierra Club.

Several representatives from the coalition will be appearing before the committee to testify about their recent interaction with DEP, discuss findings from research they have done around water testing, and to share their questions and concerns regarding DEP’s water testing and reporting policies and related issues relevant to the protection of health and the environment.

“I look forward to recounting our coalition’s situation to the committee because I believe it speaks to a broader problem of how DEP under this administration interacts with residents and addresses inquiries toward their policies and procedures,” said Steve Hvozdoch, Marcellus Shale Policy Associate, Clean Water Action.

“Our state is already punctured with so many cases of water, air, land, animal, and human health pollution and suffering – and citizens continually come to organizations like ours for help because DEP has, they feel, completely abandoned them and ignored their problems,” said Melissa Troutman, Outreach Coordinator, Mountain Watershed Association. “After two years of investigating public files at DEP, I look forward to sharing my appalling findings with the committee about shale gas drilling violations that have been overlooked, un-remediated, and un-fined, and how current policies and procedures allow for this, in the state that gets 80% of its drinking water from forested watersheds.”

“I commend the House Democratic Policy Committee for holding a hearing on a subject of great importance to many Pennsylvania residents; nothing is more important to those living on the frontlines of Marcellus Shale development than health and safety,” said Nadia Steinzor, Eastern Program Coordinator for Earthworks’ Oil & Gas Accountability Project. “There are concrete steps that DEP can take to ensure reliable water and air testing, transparency, and industry accountability—the public deserves nothing less.”

It was recently revealed that DEP Secretary Michael Krancer declined an invitation to attend the Policy Committee hearing, noting that DEP’s attention is not focused on wasting time on “political theater” and that he is willing to attend legislative hearings and other meetings if they are “productive and professional.”

“Secretary Krancer has expressed his peculiar sensitivity to meeting with environmental organizations and legislators in a manner that is unbecoming of a public servant. Using loaded language like ‘intemperate’ and ‘political theater’ to make assumptions about those working in the public interest is hardly ‘productive and professional;’ serving the public with transparency is,” says Karen Feridun, founder of Berks Gas Truth.

The coalition of organizations continue pursuing new avenues to address this issue in order to ensure the public has access to all information they need related to their health and safety. The opportunity to appear before the House Democratic Policy Committee is a good first step in that pursuit.

“We must take the knowledge gained today and apply it to action,” said Erika Staaf of PennEnvironment. “This can’t be the end of the line for this critical issue. Rather, it must be the first step toward making real, measurable policy change that creates more transparency and better oversight to provide clean drinking water, air and a safe environment for Pennsylvania residents.”

“Water is life. We pay our state environmental regulators to protect life, which includes protecting water as a bottom line responsibility,” said Iris Marie Bloom, Director, Protecting Our Waters. “To withhold information about contaminants in drinking water, and about water testing procedures, is an absolute violation of DEP’s mission. We need a sea change at PA DEP.”

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