

Philadelphia Inquirer

Fracking's use of EPA-approved toxic chemicals shows again that regulators prioritize industry over health | Editorial

The EPA, in prioritizing industry over its mandate to protect the environment, has infringed on Pennsylvania's right to pure water and our health and safety.



Little Neshaminy Creek is one of many rivers that is PFAS water contaminating local waterways and drinking water on Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2020. (Tyger Williams/The Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS)Read moreTYGER WILLIAMS / MCT by [The Editorial Board](#)

Published Jul 15, 2021

For years, evidence has mounted that fracking is at least associated with adverse health effects, including a [rare cancer cluster among children](#) in Western Pennsylvania. Instead of stopping potentially risky activity, states like Pennsylvania that sit on gas-abundant shale formations have been [commissioning studies](#) and allowing drilling to continue.

In other words, fracking has been declared safe until proven otherwise — at risk to Pennsylvanians and residents of other fracking-heavy states.

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That would have been bad enough. But a bombshell [report this week](#) revealed that the Environmental Protection Agency has allowed oil and gas

companies to use toxic chemicals in their fracking fluids despite warnings from government scientists about the potential dangers.

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Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a family of thousands of human-made chemicals that don't break down, earning the nickname "forever chemicals." Among them are PFOA and PFOS, which according to the [EPA have been linked](#) to cancer, liver, and immune problems, and impact on fetuses and breastfeeding babies.

Through Freedom of Information Act requests, Physicians for Social Responsibility, a health-care professional environmental advocacy group, [found that in 2011 the EPA approved the use of PFAS and PFAS precursors](#) — chemicals that break down into PFAS — in fracking. It found that these chemicals have been used in more than 1,200 wells in six states between 2012 and 2020.

Physicians for Social Responsibility couldn't find evidence that PFAS or their precursors have been used in fracking in Pennsylvania, but that should give Pennsylvanians little comfort. Pennsylvania law allows oil and gas companies to exempt from public disclosure the chemicals they use under the guise of trade secrets. And the same companies that have been found to use these chemicals in other states, [such as Chevron and Exxon](#), also drill wells in Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection told this board it can identify the chemicals registered as trade secrets — [a list of about 430 substances](#). In that case, DEP should immediately audit the list and publicly disclose whether any PFAS or their precursors have been used in Pennsylvania fracking.

PFAS are a known problem in Pennsylvania waters, with tests suggesting that they pollute [72% of the sampled water](#) in Philadelphia's collar counties. Some physicians say no level of PFAS in water is safe.

» **READ MORE: [PFAS found in 72% of drinking-water samples in Philly's suburbs](#)**

When the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection tested commonwealth water sources for PFAS in 2019, it [focused on areas where](#)

[contamination was deemed likely](#), such as near military bases. At the time, the connection to fracking was not public. There was no testing in some [fracking-heavy areas like Washington County](#).

The DEP doesn't seem to grasp the magnitude of the revelation. Asked by this board to comment on the latest findings, a DEP spokesperson responded: "DEP continues to investigate the potential impact of PFAS in the environment and is in the process of developing draft regulations to address them."

The lack of any more specific comment by DEP, or comment by Gov. Tom Wolf, to the potential contamination of Pennsylvania water with toxic "forever chemicals" should be shocking. But it's not.

The story of PFAS in fracking is about multibillion-dollar oil and gas corporations' management having more sway over the EPA than the people it is intended to protect. That's also largely the story of fracking in Pennsylvania. In 2019, [Attorney General Josh Shapiro released a grand jury report that blasted DEP](#) for being too cozy with the oil and gas industry.

The to-do list to respond to these revelations is long. Pennsylvania started a rulemaking process around PFAS in 2019 that needs acceleration. State Sen. Katie Muth told the board the EPA should promptly test water sources and drilling fluid waste sites in Pennsylvania for PFAS and other contaminants — we agree, and DEP should be involved as well. Dr. Ned Ketyer, a Pittsburgh-based pediatrician and board member of Pennsylvania's Physicians for Social Responsibility, told this board the revelation should lead to an immediate moratorium on fracking. At minimum, law should change to demand full disclosure of all chemicals used throughout the life cycle of a natural gas well.

The EPA, in prioritizing industry over its mandate to protect the environment, has infringed on Pennsylvania's right to pure water and our health and safety — another institution to do so for the benefit of fracking, [a declining industry propped up by subsidies](#). It's past time to declare fracking unsafe until industry can prove otherwise.

Published

July 15, 2021

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