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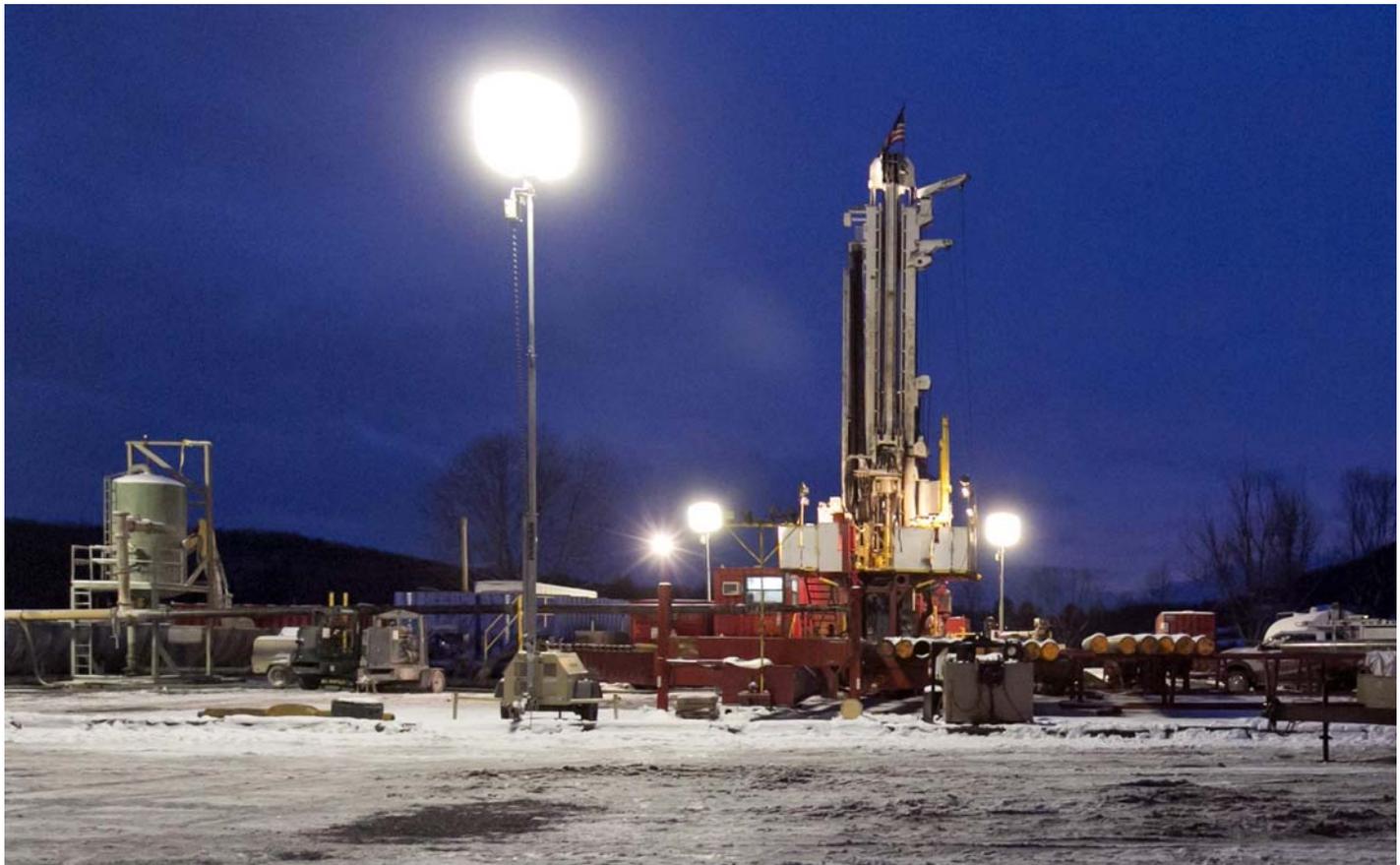
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EPA final report says 'data gaps' limit assessment of gas boom impacts

[Ken Ward Jr.](#), Staff Writer

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RICHARD DREW | AP file photo

This Jan. 17, 2013 photo shows a natural gas production site in New Milford, Pennsylvania.

In the final version of a controversial and long-awaited report, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency scientists said Tuesday that the boom in natural gas drilling and production can harm drinking water resources “under some circumstances,” but that gaps in data limit the agency’s ability to fully assess those impacts “locally and

nationally.”

The EPA backed away from some of its own public relations spin and the narrative that was pressed by the industry following the release of a draft report in June 2015, providing in its new 666-page report what other experts said was a more careful and appropriate description of the findings of a more than five-year nationwide investigation of hydraulic fracturing — or “fracking” — and other oil and gas production activities.

“This summary of the EPA report captures the state of the science much more accurately than before,” said Rob Jackson, an engineer and ecologist at Stanford University who has studied the issue. “Fracking can be done safety, but it isn’t always.”

The EPA research identified a variety of conditions where water quality impacts can be “more frequent or severe,” including spills of chemicals or contaminated water from gas wells and related activities, underground injection of the fluids used in “hydraulic fracturing” of gas wells that aren’t properly constructed, and the disposal of wastewater in unlined or improperly built pits.

Agency officials said in the final report that they had identified specific instances where contamination occurred by these mechanisms. The report said “available data and information allowed us to qualitatively describe factors that affect the frequency or severity of impacts at the local level.”

“However,” the EPA final report said, “significant data gaps and uncertainties in the available data prevented us from calculating or estimating the national frequency of impacts on drinking water resources from activities in the hydraulic fracturing water cycle.”

“The data gaps and uncertainties described in this report also precluded a full characterization of the severity of the impacts,” the final EPA report said.



Congress had ordered the study in 2010, as natural gas production in places like the Marcellus Shale region in West Virginia skyrocketed amid the increased use of a combination of horizontal drilling and fracking. Fracking is part of the process of preparing a well for production by pumping huge volumes of water and chemicals underground to split open rock formations to loosen oil and gas flow.

Agency officials called the final EPA report “the most complete compilation to date of national scientific data on the relationship of drinking water resources and hydraulic fracturing.” It is organized around the stages of natural gas production from acquiring water for fracking, mixing that water with chemical additives, injecting those fluids into production wells to free gas reserves, collecting the resulting wastewater and managing that wastewater.

The new EPA report did not propose specific new standards, regulations or enforcement, but agency officials said it could be used to guide decisions about such efforts. Still, new rules on gas-drilling seem unlikely, with the final report coming as the Obama administration prepares to leave office and President-elect Donald Trump having promised to do away with government regulations he says are hampering domestic energy industries.

The EPA rewrote its report based on strong criticism from its own Science Advisory Board, and the release of the final version comes after a report from the public radio show Marketplace that detailed last-minute changes to the earlier draft and White House involvement in the issue.

During a conference call with news reporters, top EPA science adviser Thomas Burke seem to be pushing back against any suggestion that politics — the Obama administration has been a supporter of expanding the nation’s natural gas industry — played any role in the way the draft report was written or portrayed to the public.

Burke pointed specifically to the absence in the final report to widely quoted language in the draft that said the EPA had not found evidence that fracking had caused

“widespread, systematic impacts” on drinking water resources in the country. Burke said the sentence was not in the final report because, when pressed by outside reviewers from the Science Advisory Board, EPA scientists couldn’t back it up with data.

“EPA scientists wrote that sentence in the draft because they believed it best characterized what could be supported by the science,” Burke said. “Scientists put that language in the draft report and scientists made the decision not to include it in the final report. This is the scientific process at work.”

Still, the EPA draft report itself had included a variety of disclaimers about gaps in necessary data, but that language was not highlighted in the agency’s press release or picked up on and amplified by industry officials or many media outlets.



On Tuesday, some industry groups continued to push the notion that the EPA’s report had found “no widespread, systematic impacts from fracking.” On industry group, the American Petroleum Institute, blasted the EPA, saying that the agency had abandoned science in revising its report. “It is beyond absurd for the administration to reverse course on its way out the door,” the group said.

Others said it makes no sense that data gaps still exist that prevent the EPA from answering important questions about fracking.

Marc Glass, an environmental scientist with the Morgantown consulting firm Downstream Strategies, said that more than a decade into the fracking boom, the nation “should have detailed knowledge of the fate and transport of exactly what is injected” yet “we still rely on inference, models and presumptions instead of collecting very measurable evidence.

Lissa Lucas, who lives amid the Marcellus Shale boom in Ritchie County, agreed.

“Given how important energy security is to the country, why is there any lack of data?” Lucas said. “Taxes on those industries should be sufficient to pay for studies that will make sure frack-impacted areas aren’t paying for all the negative externalities.”

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AP Top 25 Poll

Poll Released: Dec 4

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3	Clemson	3
4	Washington	4
5	Penn State	8

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