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The Facts Behind EPA's Dimock Two-Step

In Dec., EPA says water's safe; in Jan, with no new data, it says it's not – EID lays out what's known and what's not

Set aside all the stage props, backdrops and inflatable scenery deployed as part of the continuing saga known as Dimock, and you're left with a pretty basic question – albeit one to which very few outside media have gone out of their way to find a legitimate, science-based answer. Quite simply: Is the water up there safe?

On Dec. 2, 2011, EPA declared that it was, [sending an email](#) to several Dimock residents indicating that the data it had reviewed from state-certified laboratories and the Pennsylvania Dept. of Environmental Protection (DEP) “does not indicate that the well water presents an immediate health threat.” On Jan. 19, despite having no new data, EPA reversed its position, [sending a letter](#) to the agency's hazardous site cleanup division demanding “immediate action” to protect public health and safety.

Predictably, those opposed to the development of affordable, clean-burning natural gas were quick to applaud the news -- with ProPublica even declaring [in a 38-point headline](#) that EPA's change of heart constituted “evidence of fracking contamination,” even though EPA never actually said that (and couldn't have, since it gathered no data) and state experts [consistently having shown it](#) to be false. So once again, amidst all the pomp, circumstance and fanfare, we're left with a couple questions: For starters, what [do the data](#) actually indicate is in the water? And second: Is there actually any evidence suggesting that any of it got there as a result of natural gas development?

In an effort to answer the first question, EPA released a series of memos and letters last week – the list is available [here](#) -- laying out in specific terms what was found in wells tested by DEP on and near Carter Rd. But sift through the dozen or so documents posted on the website, and eventually you stumble across two memos of significantly greater value than the rest. The first is a memo written by technician Donna Ioven to Richard Fetzer, EPA's “on-scene coordinator” in Dimock. The second is a [10-page letter](#) from Mr. Fetzer to his bosses at EPA.

As you can see by clicking [here](#), the Ioven memo is short, sweet and to the point: not even two pages in length, and almost all of it focused on identifying which specific components were found in which specific residential water wells. Of the eight wells for which DEP collected data, Ms. Ioven writes that four of them contained compounds of potential concern: Resident 4 had high levels of sodium and manganese; same for Resident 6; Resident 7 had manganese; and Resident 8, arsenic. These were the four households selected by EPA for water deliveries.

The Ioven memo is supposed to serve as the factual, technical basis for Mr. Fetzer's letter to EPA's Dennis Carney – capturing and reporting what is known and what isn't, and passing that information up the food-chain for further consideration. But here's the problem: **Fetzer's letter doesn't look anything like Ioven's memo.** The latter, as mentioned, is a simple recitation of facts and figures. The former, unfortunately, reads more like a brief filed by a plaintiff's attorney – attempting to defend EPA's decision to intervene by going out of its way to link each of the components found in wells to drilling activity (and on several occasions, looking quite silly doing it).

Take, for instance, Mr. Fetzer's explanation for how arsenic may have found its way into one private well: suggesting in his letter it could have gotten there from “the use and effects of drilling fluids.” But [spend](#) about 10 seconds researching the issue online, and you find that arsenic isn't even used as a component of drilling and/or completing a well. So where did it come from? According to the U.S Geological Survey (4:00 of [this video](#)): “**Overwhelmingly**, the evidence that we have suggests that the arsenic we see in groundwater **originates from natural sources.**” Unfortunately, this overwhelming evidence appears to be news to Mr. Fetzer.

The Fetzer letter also makes sure to mention that “glycols” were found in one well, once again attempting to blame that on

“drilling fluids.”

Glycols are a major ingredient of antifreeze, and much like other industrial processes, are sometimes used in very small percentages [in an oil and gas context](#) to prevent scale build-up in the pipe. Thing is, Cabot has already confirmed that it didn't use any glycols when it drilled and completed its wells in the area more than two years ago. And actually, the one well in which glycols were detected came in at such low levels that EPA didn't include that household among the four it chose to receive water deliveries. As reported by [the Philadelphia Inquirer](#): “Tests also found glycol, which is used in antifreeze, **at safe levels**, and 2-methoxyethanol, a solvent, which does not have an established toxicity level. Those houses **are not** receiving shipments of water.”

So, after all that, apparently what we have is an issue with sodium and manganese. According to Mr. Fetzer, manganese is “known to be a constituent of some specialized drilling fluids.” Which fluids are those? And did Cabot actually use any of them in Dimock? Fetzer doesn't say, probably because Fetzer doesn't know. So we posed the question to the operator itself; the answer we got back was a resounding “no.” But, as we were reminded, neither sodium or manganese is considered a health hazard by EPA. In fact, EPA doesn't even have what's called a “maximum contaminant level” (or MCL) for either of those two. According to [one federal report](#):

High levels of ... manganese **do not pose any known adverse health risks**. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has not set maximum contaminant levels (MCL) for ... manganese in the National Primary Drinking Water Regulations. Secondary maximum contaminant levels (SMCL) recommended in the National Secondary Drinking Water Regulations **are set for esthetic reasons** and are not enforceable by EPA.”

So there you have it. Boil it all down, condense it, strain it, and reduce it to its irreducible parts, and what you're left with is a decision by EPA to spend hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars supplying water to people who don't need it -- a decision made less than two months after the agency deemed the water to be safe, using **the same exact data** that it cited last week in arguing the opposite. Of the four households set to receive water, three of them have elevated levels of two things that EPA itself doesn't consider hazardous to health. And the fourth? According to federal scientists, that well has something in it of which “overwhelming evidence” indicates a natural origin. Not drilling a well.

But you know what really gets our goat? According to [an updated study](#) released by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania last year, more than 40 percent of private water wells tested in the state don't meet basic health and safety standards for drinking water – for reasons that have nothing to do with oil or natural gas. Considering that more than three million folks across the state rely on wells for their water, that means more than one million Pennsylvanians could be drinking water today that's unsafe.

All of which begs the question: If this thing weren't about politics, why isn't EPA supplying clean water to any of them?

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