

Hydraulic Fracturing: Is it Safe?

by Linda Parks, Ventura County Supervisor, January 24, 2013

What you don't know might or might not hurt you, and what we know about hydraulic fracturing in Ventura County isn't enough to know if the public is protected or not. This was my take-away from the recent panel discussion hosted by the Association of Water Agencies of Ventura County and reported in the Star's January 17th article: "Little Water Threat Seen." While perhaps not intended, the title of the article does point to the problem that you can't see if there is a threat to our aquifers because information on hydraulic fracturing is not disclosed.

Commonly referred to as "fracking", hydraulic fracturing is a drilling technique that uses high pressure to inject water, sand and chemicals deep into the ground to assist in oil and gas extraction. The process uses hundreds of thousands of gallons of water per well. A new horizontal drilling technology that can drill down a mile and out a mile can reach new oil and gas reserves in areas previously unreachable. The combination of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling could lead to a booming industry in our area where the Monterey Shale is a target resource in the State California.

As our nation looks to expand domestic oil and gas production, we need to make sure hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling are done responsibly so our fresh water aquifers aren't contaminated and our creeks, rivers and ocean aren't polluted by the chemicals used in the process.

We heard at the AWA presentation that California has no requirements for disclosure of the chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing operations. We also learned there is no information on which of the hundreds of oil and gas wells in Ventura County use the process.

Although there are regulations for handling and disposing of oil field wastewater, there are no separate regulations for the wastewater (known as "overflow" or "produced water") that comes from these fracking operations.

A report released in 2011 by the U.S. House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee did provide some data on the chemicals used in fracking: from 2005 to 2009, fourteen major gas and oil companies used 750 different chemicals in their fracking fluids. Some of the ingredients are common and generally harmless, like salt and citric acid. Others are extremely toxic and carcinogenic including benzene, ethylbenzene, toluene and xylene. Fracking can also release methane gas, another potentially hazardous aspect of the process.

As stated in the Star's article, the new hydraulic technology has outpaced the regulators' ability to regulate it. Regulations on the conduct and safety of fracking operations are currently under development by the State but have not yet been adopted. The Ventura County Board of Supervisors asks our State and Federal government to establish requirements to ensure the public's health and safety. Specifically, we've asked that the industry be required to disclose the chemicals used in the hydraulic fracturing process and the location of the wells where the process is used. In addition, we believe that monitoring of fracking operations should be conducted to protect our water resources. Since close to one-third of our county households depend on groundwater for drinking water, protecting our water quality cannot be more important.