

# Methane study, EPA debunk claims of water pollution, climate change from fracking

By [Ben Wolfgang](#)

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**\*\*FILE\*\*** A Chesapeake Energy natural gas well site operates near Burlington, Pa. ... [more >](#)

After a 16-month investigation, state regulators Monday said that natural gas fracking, contrary to highly publicized claims, isn't to blame for high methane levels in three families' drinking water in a northern Pennsylvania town.

For fracking proponents, it was another piece of good news. The oil and gas industry still was unwrapping the [federal government's](#) acknowledgment that fracking isn't nearly as harmful to the environment as it previously claimed. By dramatically lowering its methane emissions estimates from natural gas drilling sites, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) has made it much more difficult to argue that the fracking boom is accelerating [climate change](#).

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The developments Monday in Franklin Forks, Pa., also will make it much more difficult to argue that the wildly successful drilling method is harmful to drinking water.

The state's [Department of Environmental Protection](#) now says there is no evidence to connect natural gas drilling with high levels of methane in private water wells in the small town, which sits within the Marcellus Shale region, one of the largest known natural gas deposits in the world and exhibit A of how fracking is transforming the American energy landscape.

The [agency](#) specifically says the gas is coming from elsewhere.

"The testing determined that the water samples taken from the private water wells contained gas of similar isotopic makeup to the gas in water samples taken from Salt Springs State

Park,” which contains high levels of naturally occurring methane, the [DEP](#) said in a statement.

The Franklin Forks case attracted national attention and was held up by some environmentalists as another example of the dangers of fracking. It was also the subject of numerous [media](#) reports, including a Rolling Stone magazine photo essay that labeled one Franklin Forks family “Fracking’s Real-Life Victims.”

The family believed that nearby natural gas drilling was ruining their property and had rendered their water unusable and undrinkable. Similar claims have been made elsewhere in Pennsylvania and in other spots across the nation.

Thus far, however, there have been no confirmed cases of fracking contaminating water supplies — an acknowledgment that [Lisa P. Jackson](#), as [EPA](#) administrator, made twice to [Congress](#).

Fracking, formally known as hydraulic fracturing, uses massive amounts of water combined with sand and chemicals to crack underground rock and release trapped gas. It is being used extensively in states across the nation and is credited with putting the U.S. on a path toward North American energy independence within the next 10 to 15 years.

While [environmental](#) groups likely will dispute the Franklin Forks findings, Pennsylvania officials are making perfectly clear that nearby fracking simply could not be responsible for the elevated methane levels.

“The water samples taken from the private water wells was not of the same origin as the natural gas in the nearby gas wells,” the [DEP](#) said.

Many in the environmental community argue that the Pennsylvania outcome should have been expected. The [DEP](#), they say, is hesitant to go after energy companies that have provided thousands of jobs for Keystone State residents and poured billions of dollars into local economies.

That argument cannot be made about the [EPA](#), which is taking the lead in President Obama’s pledged fight against climate change. The [agency](#)’s report makes clear that fracking isn’t as big a part of that struggle as previously thought.

Even though natural gas production has exploded in recent years, the [EPA](#) now says that private industry’s pollution control efforts have cut methane emissions by an annual average of 41.6 million metric tons from 1990 to 2010, a 20 percent reduction from previous estimates.

Methane is the main component of natural gas and is the second most prevalent greenhouse gas in the U.S. Like any other carbon-based [fuel](#), methane will release carbon dioxide into

the air when burned, but raw methane leaked directly into the atmosphere is, on a per-ton basis, a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

Beyond the science-speak, the [agency](#)'s numbers mean that fracking isn't driving climate change to the degree some critics had suggested.

Industry analysts also predict that methane emissions from fracking sites will decrease over the years as oil and gas companies implement better [technologies](#). They point out that since methane is the actual product being sold, unlike sludge or waste pollution, energy companies have every economic incentive to have as little leak as possible.

- *This article is based in part on wire service reports.*

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