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By The Associated Press

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Six years into a natural gas boom, Pennsylvania has for the first time released details of 243 cases in which companies prospecting for oil or gas were found by state regulators to have contaminated private drinking water wells.

The Department of Environmental Protection on Thursday posted online links to the documents since the agency conducted a “thorough review” of paper files stored among its regional offices. The Associated Press and other news outlets have filed lawsuits and numerous open-records requests during the past several years seeking records of investigations into gas-drilling complaints.

Pennsylvania's auditor general said in a report last month that DEP's system for handling complaints “was woefully inadequate” and that investigators could not even determine whether all complaints were actually entered into a reporting system.

DEP didn't immediately issue a statement with the online release, but posted the links on the same day that seven environmental groups sent a letter urging the agency to heed the auditor general's 29 recommendations for improvement.

“I guess this is a step in the right direction,” Thomas Au of the Pennsylvania Sierra Club chapter said of the public release of documents on drinking well problems. “But this is something that should have been made public a long time ago.”

The 243 cases, from 2008 to 2014, include some where a single drilling operation impacted multiple water wells. The problems listed in the documents include methane gas contamination, spills of wastewater and other pollutants, and wells that went dry or were otherwise undrinkable. Some of the problems were temporary, but the names of landowners were redacted, so it was not clear if the problems were resolved to their satisfaction. Other complaints are being investigated.

The gas-rich Marcellus shale lies under large parts of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, New York and Ohio. A drilling boom that took off in 2008 has made the Marcellus the most productive natural gas field in the nation, and more than 6,000 shale gas wells have been drilled. That has led to billions of dollars in revenue for companies and landowners, but also to complaints from homeowners about ruined water supplies.

Extracting fuel from shale formations requires pumping millions of gallons of water, along with sand and chemicals, into the ground to break apart rock and free the gas. Some of that water, along with other heavy metals and contaminants, returns to the surface.

The documents released on Thursday listed drilling-related water well problems in 22 counties, with most cases in Susquehanna, Tioga, Lycoming, and Bradford counties in the northeast portion of the state.

Some energy companies have dismissed or downplayed the issue of water well contamination, suggesting that it rarely or never happens.

The Marcellus Shale Coalition, the main industry group, suggested that geology and Pennsylvania's lack of standards for water well construction were partly to blame.

Coalition President Dave Spigelmyer said in a statement that Pennsylvania “has longstanding water well-related challenges, a function of our region's unique geology — where stray methane gas is frequently present in and around shallow aquifers.” He said many of the problems were related to surface spills, not drilling.

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