

New Federal Report Shows Dimock Water Was Unsafe to Drink After All

Sharon Kelly, DeSmog Blog | June 3, 2016 9:23 am |

Don't miss out. Stay Informed. Get EcoWatch's Top News of the Day.

Email

Back in 2012, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) made a startling announcement, shaking up the battle over **fracking** in one of the nation's highest-profile cases where drillers were suspected to have caused water contamination.

Water testing results were in for homeowners along Carter Road in **Dimock**, Pennsylvania, where for years, homeowners reported their water had turned brown, became flammable or started clogging their well with "black greasy feeling sediment" after Cabot Oil and Gas began drilling in the area. The EPA seemed to conclude the water wasn't so bad after all.



Dimock resident Ray Kemble displays bottles of water that he said were collected from his well and his neighbor's well earlier this year. Photo credit: Laura Evangelisto, Copyright 2016

“The sampling and an evaluation of the particular circumstances at each home did not indicate levels of contaminants that would give EPA reason to take further action,” EPA Regional Administrator Shawn M. Garvin said in a press release.

The drilling industry crowed. “The data released today once again confirms the EPA’s and DEP’s [Department of Environmental Protection] findings that levels of contaminants found do not possess a threat to human health and the environment,” Cabot said in a statement.

“It’s obviously very good news for the folks who actually live there and pretty squarely in line with what we’ve known up there for a while now,” Energy in Depth **told** POLITICOPro. “It’s not very good news for the out-of-state folks who have sought to use Dimock as a talking point in

their efforts to prevent development elsewhere, but I'm sure they'll be working hard over the weekend to spin it differently, notwithstanding the pretty clear statement made by EPA today."

Now, a [newly published report](#) by the [Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry](#) (ATSDR), part of the [Centers for Disease Control](#) (CDC), puts EPA's testing results into an entirely new light.

The water was not safe to drink after all, the ATSDR concluded, after a lengthy review of the same water testing results that EPA used back in 2012.

"ATSDR found some of the chemicals in the private water wells at this site at levels high enough to affect health (27 private water wells), pose a physical hazard (17 private water wells) or affect general water quality so that it may be unsuitable for drinking," the ATSDR's [health consultation](#)—launched in 2011 and published May 24—concludes.

The new report lists 10 contaminants, including arsenic, lithium and 4-chlorophenyl phenyl ether, that are "chemicals of health concern," at the levels found in Carter Road wells, found that five homes were at "immediate risk of fire or explosion" because of [methane](#) in their water and another dozen showed lower, but still worrisome, levels of methane and found that the water was laced with elevated levels of metals, salts and total dissolved solids.

The underlying data isn't new to the residents of Carter Road. The EPA provided it to them individually back in 2012, which is why the EPA's announcement that the water was safe was so baffling at the time.

"I'm sitting here looking at the values I have on my sheet—I'm over the thresholds—and yet they are telling me my water is drinkable," Nolan Scott Ely, one of the Carter Road homeowners, [told ProPublica](#) when EPA made its announcement. "I'm confused about the whole thing ... I'm flabbergasted."

Opposite Conclusions?

So how could two different agencies look at the exact same data and come to opposite conclusions?

"Although the same data set was used, the EPA as a regulatory agency specifically looked at whether or not it was required to take action under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, more commonly known as Superfund, which governs

responses to environmental emergencies,” StateImpact, a National Public Radio project, [explained](#). “The ‘health consultation’ looked at the entire data set from a public health standpoint, assessing whether or not it was safe to drink the water.”

In other words, EPA’s findings, which seemed to show that the water was “safe” and which were promoted by drillers as proof that nothing was wrong in Dimock, instead represented a very carefully parsed legal finding that the water did not reach Superfund levels of contamination for the specific substances EPA focused on.

And the EPA’s 2012 findings had left out some of the very contaminants that had caused locals the most concern—including the natural gas or methane, itself. “EPA’s investigation does not include an evaluation of the risk posed by elevated levels of methane—which continue to exist in some homes in Dimock—and which, at extreme levels and if unaddressed, can lead to explosions,” Natural Resources Defense Council Senior Attorney Kate Sinding [wrote](#) in a blog post at the time. The EPA’s strained official interpretation of the data perhaps shows why EPA staff remained concerned even after the agency dropped its Dimock investigation in July 2012, just months after its testing results had been announced in March and April.

In 2013, a Los Angeles Times [investigation](#) revealed that EPA’s own staff had disagreed with the agency’s public statements that the water shouldn’t be considered hazardous. An internal EPA Powerpoint [presentation](#), later obtained and [published](#) by DeSmog, showed that agency scientists had concluded that the drilling and fracking process “apparently cause significant damage to the water quality.”

The ATSDR’s new report very specifically notes that it does not look at whether the water hazards stem from drilling or pre-date Cabot’s arrival in the area. In part, that’s because of a lack of pre-drilling testing for gas and other common fracking-related chemicals in the water. “It is important to note that methane was not assessed in residential water wells prior to the initiation of natural gas drilling activities in the Dimock area,” the ATSDR wrote.

Cabot Oil and Gas emphasized their belief that methane in the water was “naturally occurring” and pre-dated their arrival in a statement provided to StateImpact. “This data is consistent with thousands of

pages of water data collected by both Cabot and the Pennsylvania DEP and does not indicate that those contaminants detected have any relationship to oil and gas development in Dimock,” Cabot said. The ATSDR report does often note when substances discovered in the Carter Road water are known to be associated with hydraulic fracturing or drilling industry activities, but does not reach any conclusions about whether the chemicals came from Cabot’s operations.

“It’s not their job to look at who caused whatever contamination there is,” Bryce Payne, a Pennsylvania environmental scientist, **told** E&E News. “It’s their job to see if there are health implications. They did that and concluded there are health implications.”

The new report is also limited to data from four years ago—and conditions have changed, the ATSDR noted, in part because a state moratorium on fracking along Carter Road was briefly lifted after the EPA dropped its investigation and locals quickly reported more changes to their water, including higher levels of methane.

Cabot Oil Settles

In August 2012—right around the time that EPA abandoned its investigation—Cabot Oil and Gas **announced** it had settled the vast majority of lawsuits against it by Carter Road residents for an undisclosed amount of money and under terms that barred the plaintiffs from speaking negatively about their experiences with the company.

This March, a federal jury handed down a \$4.24 million verdict to the remaining two Carter Road families, concluding that the water was in fact contaminated because of the negligence of the drilling company.

Cabot has begun the process of appealing that verdict.

But while the legal filings and agency reports continue to stack up, the problem on Carter Road remains the same as it has for many years now.

While those who settled with Cabot had water treatment systems installed by the company, locals familiar with those systems say that even the treated water seems too contaminated to drink and the water treatment systems break down frequently.

The ATSDR’s report provides recommendations that water should have been treated to address dangerous contamination levels—but those recommendations are not binding and the agency noted that while the

state government collected samples more recently, the ATSDR did not have access to the newer data.

Community organizers are still calling for the federal government to resume an active role, arguing that the groundwater remains undrinkable.

“We’re demanding that they reopen the investigation,” Craig Stevens, a local organizer, **told** DeSmog after the March verdict was announced, “and also get water to these people.”

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE

[Sanders Touts Fracking Ban as Clinton Pushes Renewables Plan Just Days Before California Primary](#)

[These 33 Cities Cheated on Lead Contamination Tests, Similar to Flint, Michigan](#)

[Feds Find Offshore Fracking in the Pacific Would Have No ‘Significant’ Environmental Impact](#)

[Scottish Parliament Passes Motion in Support of Outright Fracking Ban](#)