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E.P.A. Steps Up Scrutiny of Pollution in Pennsylvania Rivers

By IAN URBINA

Radioactivity levels are “at or below” safe levels in Pennsylvania rivers, state regulators said on Monday, based on water samples taken last November and December from seven rivers.

The results come at a time of growing scrutiny of the potential hazards of radioactivity and other contaminants in wastewater from natural-gas drilling. The wastewater is routinely sent to treatment plants in Pennsylvania, which then discharge their waste into rivers.

In a letter sent to the state on Monday, the federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#) noted the state’s test results, but instructed officials there to perform testing within 30 days for radioactivity at drinking-water intake plants.

It also said that all permits issued by the state to treatment plants handling this waste should be reviewed to ensure that operators were complying with the law.

The E.P.A. asked the state for data and documents so it could check whether current permits were strict enough in requiring monitoring and in limiting the type of pollution the treatment plants can release into rivers.

“E.P.A. is prepared to exercise its enforcement authorities as appropriate where our investigations reveal violations of federal law,” the letter said.

The E.P.A.’s moves follow [reports](#) in The New York Times about gas-industry wastewater with high levels of radioactivity being sent to sewage treatment plants that were not designed to remove radioactive materials. These plants then discharge the processed wastewater into rivers and streams.

The Times found that samples taken by the state in the Monongahela River — a source of drinking water for parts of Pittsburgh — came from a point upstream from the two sewage treatment plants on that river. The state has said those plants are still accepting significant quantities of drilling waste.

Because that sampling site is upstream, the discharges from those two plants are not captured by the state's monitoring plans.

Asked on Monday if the state planned to correct the problem, Katy Gresh, a spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, said it was still considering where to take samples in the future and whether to require testing at drinking-water intake plants.

Last week, federal lawmakers called for continued monitoring, and some began drafting legislation to require it.

[Lisa P. Jackson](#), the Environmental Protection Agency administrator, told the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Environment last Thursday that she was heading to Pennsylvania that week and planned to order testing at treatment plants and drinking-water intakes. On Friday, Ms. Jackson contacted the governor's office to discuss oversight concerns but has not received a response, a person familiar with the agency's efforts said.

At least two water companies, the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority and the Pennsylvania American Water Company, announced that they had begun voluntarily testing for radioactivity.

The Marcellus Shale Coalition, a natural-gas industry group, announced Monday that it would create a \$100,000 fund to support heightened water testing.

Although the state's river monitor tests said the radioactivity in the water was at safe levels in November and December, public health experts called for broader and continual testing.

"As long as we are going to allow [oil](#) and gas wastewater to enter these streams," said Conrad Volz, director of the Center for Healthy Environments and Communities at the [University of Pittsburgh](#), "there needs to be monitoring weekly at least for a whole host of contaminants, including radium, barium, strontium."

Mr. Volz said that he planned to release on Wednesday the results of water monitoring conducted by his team last December on wastewater discharged from a sewage treatment plant into the Blacklick River.

He said he did not test for radioactivity. But he did test for bromides, strontium, chlorides and other contaminants, and he said he found dangerous levels sometimes more than 10,000 times the safe drinking-water standard.

He said that he plans to issue a warning on Wednesday to anyone who drinks water from wells that are near the sites he tested.

Senator Bob Casey, Democrat of Pennsylvania, emphasized that continued testing was essential because river levels are high now but the concentration of drilling waste contaminants could increase sharply during periods of drought.

Some environmental groups said they believed that sewage treatment plants needed to stop taking the wastewater altogether, adding that they planned to try to block treatment plants from accepting the wastewater or force federal regulators to increase their involvement.

"Both the state and E.P.A. have failed to make these plants get proper permits for discharging oil and gas wastewater into our rivers," said Myron Arnowitt, the Pennsylvania director for Clean Water Action, an advocacy group.

His organization said it would join this week with Three Rivers Waterkeeper in suing two sewage treatment plants for violations of the federal Clean Water Act and for not having a proper permit to discharge industrial drilling waste into rivers.



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