

Marcellus Drilling and Private Drinking Water Supplies; What Do I Need To Know?

This column is presented weekly by the Public Education sub-committee of the Clinton County Natural Gas Task Force in an effort to provide accurate, up-to-date information on activities surrounding the Marcellus Shale formation and the natural gas exploration industry. For more information on Task Force activities, visit the Task Force page on the Clinton County government website at www.clintoncountypa.com.

Area residents interested in maintaining healthy well and spring water are encouraged to attend a presentation next Thursday evening in Lock Haven. The free public forum, titled “Private Drinking Water Testing: What do I need to know about Natural Gas?,” will begin at 6:00 p.m. at the Lock Haven Emergency Medical Services (EMS) building on Liberty Street (across from St. Agnes Church).

The June 9th presentation is being sponsored by the Clinton County Natural Gas Task Force in response to concerns about natural gas drilling and its impact to private drinking water supplies. Jim Ladlee, director of the Penn State Extension office in Clinton County, will serve as moderator. Featured guest speakers will be Bryan Swistock, water resource extension specialist from Penn State’s School of Forest Resources, and Dan Vilello with the PA Department of Environmental Protection’s (DEP) Williamsport northcentral region office.

People will also have a chance to speak with representatives from several companies that conduct home water sampling, and water testing labs. Those representatives will have informational material and can talk about their services and the cost of those services.

Next Thursday’s session is the second such meeting; about 30 people turned out on May 19th at the Chapman Township Fire Hall to hear the presentation.

Nearly 6,700 homes in Clinton County are served by private water supplies, according to Swistock, who begins his presentation by talking about various issues people can face with private water systems. He notes that water testing helps document any problems, and it helps document water quality.

Swistock will discuss regulations currently in place to protect private water supplies. He’ll outline common concerns people have about natural gas drilling in the area near their water and offer suggestions on how to establish a baseline of your water quality before drilling occurs. He also offers guidance on what to test for in your water, when to have testing done, and how to get answers to questions and better understand and interpret test results.

“For property owners where natural gas drilling will be occurring, you can require testing as part of your lease,” says Swistock. “You can also include other stipulations in your lease, such as greater setbacks for drilling near water supplies. If you aren’t a property owner but drilling is going to occur near your property, you may want to speak to the drilling company to see if they’d consider paying to have your water supply tested prior to the beginning of drilling. They may not pay, but it doesn’t hurt to ask.”

Vilello highlights new regulations, finalized this past February, for oil and gas well casings and cementing. Both casings in the drilling process and proper cementing are said to be two critical items to preventing migration of gas into water supplies.

“The new regulations are for the protection of home owners and property owners,” says Vilello. “They offer more protection of water sources.”

Vilello will also update people on natural gas drilling activities. For example, DEP issued permits for 48 Marcellus Shale wells in Clinton County last year, and 35 wells were drilled. As of April 2011, 28 Marcellus wells were permitted in Clinton County, and six were drilled.

“Next Thursday’s program is a great opportunity to learn about the importance of home water testing, and to get answers to any questions you might have,” says Ladlee. He adds that the intent is to give people time, beginning at 6:00 p.m. to talk with representatives from water testing companies, after which, Swistock and Vilello will make their presentations and respond to questions.

Two sub-committees of the Clinton County Natural Gas Task Force – the environmental committee and the public education committee – have organized the forum, along with the Clinton County Cooperative Extension Office and the Clinton County Economic Partnership. Anyone with questions about next Thursday’s meeting can contact Jim Ladlee at 570-726-0022, extension 126.



A representative from an area water testing lab, left, answers questions from a participant in the first of two private water testing forums, held May 19 at the Chapman Township Fire Hall. The second forum is slated for next Thursday in Lock Haven, beginning at 6:00 p.m., at the Lock Haven EMS building on Liberty Street.



Water resources expert Bryan Swistock holds an example of a sanitary well cap during his discussion on various issues which can plague private water systems. Swistock and DEP representative Dan Vilello are the key presenters at next Thursday’s private drinking water testing program.