



June 8, 2015

Tintera: Regulatory thread connects quakes, frac(k)s and feds

Past RRC director outlines agency's actions amid controversies

As I watch the national drama unfold about induced seismicity, and the resulting polarization of opinions, I can't help but be reminded of the **Range Resource** case in Parker County in late 2010. After investigating complaints that hydraulic fracturing had caused gas contamination in a shallow domestic aquifer, the **Environmental Protection Agency** issued an unprecedented emergency order to the oil company requiring it to take immediate action to protect the complaining homeowners.

The **Railroad Commission of Texas** responded with a public hearing. The agency quickly determined that the science and fact demonstrated that hydraulic fracturing had not caused the natural gas in the water wells.

That RRC decision has stood the test of time, and, with the recent EPA hydraulic fracturing study being released a few days ago, it has now been confirmed by the federal government. Hydraulic fracturing is not a common cause of groundwater contamination. To quote the EPA from a recent **National Public Radio** report:

We found the hydraulic fracturing activities in the United States are carried out in a way that has not led to widespread systemic impacts on drinking water resources," says **Tom Burke**, science adviser and deputy assistant administrator of the EPA's **Office of Research and Development**. "In fact the number of documented impacts to drinking water resources is relatively low when compared to the number of fractured wells," he adds.

But many observers do not recognize that the RRC took further action. The agency crafted a comprehensive set of modern regulatory requirements on Jan. 1, 2014, that revised the oil field's existing completion rules (**Statewide Rule 13**) and allowed the regulators to remain firmly in charge of the new technology of fracturing.

The RRC's resolute action is now repeating itself with induced seismicity, and this time supported by the **Texas Legislature**. As public concern over earthquakes near oil field injection wells has grown, the RRC put into place in November of 2014 a regulatory framework requiring a risk assessment of both location and operation of the proposed

injection well before a disposal permit will be issued. Meanwhile, the Legislature has funded the **Bureau of Economic Geology** at the **University of Texas at Austin** to gather more statewide data, which will only help the regulators in these efforts. The public should applaud the RRC and the Legislature for their foresight.

As the recent debate between the industry and academia on induced seismicity at specific sites develops, the proper place to air that debate is in front of our state regulators. This past Friday's give-and-take discussion at RRC headquarters regarding the report issued by **Southern Methodist University**, "**Causal Factors for Seismicity near Azle, Texas**", clearly demonstrated the value of this venue.

Next on the agenda are two **Show Cause Hearings**, with results that will eventually be determined by **RRC Commissioners David Porter, Christie Craddick and Ryan Sitton**. Once again, the RRC will weigh the science and fact and determine a course of action.

We are fortunate in Texas to have a statewide elected body that encompasses the authority and conviction to take these steps in a time where controversy seems to be a byproduct of energy production. The connector of "**Quakes, Fracs and Feds**" is a regulatory thread of science and fact, as well as the leadership and authority of our Texas Railroad Commission, that ensures oil field activity does not pose a threat to the public or the economy of our great state.

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