

Baseline Testing for Gas Well Contamination

Provided by the Community Science Institute, Ithaca

FAQ # 1. What is baseline water testing?

The shale gas industry and hydraulic fracturing technology present two general types of risk to water: Catastrophic contamination events caused by industrial accidents, and gradual contamination as gas wells proliferate and small impacts accumulate. Contamination can affect groundwater, surface water or both. A pre-drilling baseline test is a form of insurance in case contamination occurs.

The baseline test looks for “signature chemicals” that are typically associated with gas well activity, including waste fluids. If later water tests show significantly increased levels of these “signature chemicals” after drilling occurs, the changes would provide evidence that contamination had resulted from drilling activities.

FAQ # 2. What are the chances my drinking water will be contaminated?

Not enough scientific studies have been done to know for sure, but a reasonable estimate is probably in the 1% to 5% range. Possible sources of groundwater contamination are failure of the cement casing surrounding the well bore, unforeseen rock fractures, and accidental spills of chemicals or waste fluids during transport, drilling, or storage.

FAQ # 3. What should I test my water for and what does it cost?

Testing for a comprehensive baseline set of “signature chemicals” based on current shale gas extraction technology is recommended. The tests cover chemicals and conditions that have the greatest probability of being impacted by gas drilling operations or waste: pH, alkalinity, turbidity, total suspended solids, total dissolved solids, chloride, conductivity, MBAS (detergents), chemical oxygen demand, total hardness, calcium, barium, strontium, arsenic, iron, manganese, methane, volatile organic compounds including BTEX, and gross alpha and beta radioactivity. These tests cover all the major classes of impacts from shale gas operations; more tests would add expense but not effectiveness. Significant increases in some, but not necessarily all, “signature chemicals” would indicate contamination and the need for extensive testing to assess health risks, paid for by the gas company or NY State.

FAQ # 4. When should I test my water?

Water can be tested any time up to five years prior to drilling. Notwithstanding slight seasonal fluctuations, groundwater quality is essentially constant, absent major events such as droughts or earthquakes. The federal and state governments routinely monitor water quality every five to six years.

FAQ # 5. Where should I have my water tested?

Only test results from labs certified by NY State Department of Health are admissible in legal proceedings involving gas wells in New York. Collecting samples and maintaining a valid chain of custody are relatively simple procedures; however, they must be performed by a third party, either staff from the lab or another water quality professional, for legal purposes.

FAQ # 6. Who owns the baseline test results?

Whoever pays for the tests, owns the results. If a gas company pays, the results belong to the gas company. The owner of the test results must give written permission before the lab can release the results to anyone else.

FAQ # 7. Can I help protect our region's water?

Groundwater is the source of drinking water for most rural households in our region, and it is also the main source of water in streams, ponds and lakes. Contamination of groundwater is a potentially catastrophic event, because it is all but impossible to remediate, and because it can also result in contamination of surface water. Despite the crucial role of groundwater in the lives of rural communities, relatively little is known about groundwater quality.



This FAQ sheet is based on information provided as a public service by the Community Science Institute (CSI), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to monitor and protect natural resources, particularly water. More detailed information is available at http://www.communityscience.org/?page_id=1066. CSI operates a certified water quality testing laboratory located near the Ithaca airport and certified by the New York State Department of Health – Environmental Laboratory Approval Program (NYSDOH-ELAP ID# 11790). In addition to certified baseline testing of private drinking water wells, CSI partners with a network of more than 100 volunteers to monitor water quality in streams in the Cayuga Lake and Upper Susquehanna River watersheds. The lab is certified to test drinking water samples from private wells. www.communityscience.org. 607-257-6606.