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DeGette pulls amendment to disclose fracking chemicals

By Dennis Webb
Thursday, May 27, 2010

U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Denver, on Wednesday withdrew a bill amendment seeking disclosure of substances used in hydraulic fracturing during oil and gas development.

DeGette spokeswoman Juliet Johnson said the congresswoman took the action because it appears she's close to reaching a disclosure agreement with industry and others. Also Wednesday, Exxon-Mobil shareholders rejected by nearly a 3-1 margin a shareholder proposal to have the company report on the environmental impacts of its fracturing and the approaches it could take to reduce those impacts.

ExxonMobil is heavily involved in natural gas development in Rio Blanco County, part of western Colorado's Piceance Basin. Gas development in the Piceance and several other gas fields in the county relies on injecting water, sand and chemicals into wells under high pressure to fracture formations and boost production. However, the practice is raising concerns about possible contamination of groundwater and other impacts.

DeGette has introduced legislation requiring disclosure of fracturing chemicals and eliminating the current exemption of the process from the Safe Drinking Water Act. Johnson said DeGette had seen the amendment approach as an opportunity to deal with the disclosure issue sooner. DeGette sought to amend a measure providing water infrastructure funding under the Safe Drinking Water Act, but withdrew it before the measure's passage by a 45-1 vote by the House Energy and Commerce Committee Wednesday.

Last month, a bipartisan group of 16 congressmen signed a letter to the committee's leadership urging support for maintaining hydraulic fracturing's Safe Drinking Water Act exemption. They cited what they said was "little or no evidence" that the practice is contaminating drinking water, said oil and gas regulation has historically and appropriately been handled by states, and worried that new regulations could have economic impacts and consequences for the nation's energy security.

The proposal ExxonMobil shareholders considered Wednesday was offered by As You Sow, a San Francisco shareholder advocacy group. It said in a news release that the 26.3 percent support it received was five times what's typical for a first-time environmental resolution by corporate shareholders, and sends a "strong message" to ExxonMobil.

ExxonMobil has voiced support for disclosure of fracturing fluid ingredients by energy service companies, but its board opposed the shareholder measure.

"The Board believes the minimal environmental impacts of hydraulic fracturing have been well-documented and regulatory protections are well-established; therefore, an additional report is not necessary," ExxonMobil said in a proxy statement.

Last week, shareholders for Williams Cos., the leading gas producer in the Piceance Basin, rejected a similar proposal.

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Rep. Diana DeGette