

# Star-Telegram

## State says driller not responsible for Parker County contamination

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The Texas Railroad Commission found Tuesday that natural gas wells operated by Fort Worth-based Range Resources clearly were not responsible for methane contamination of two Parker County water wells, as claimed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The commission, in a 3-0 vote absolving Range of wrongdoing, agreed with previous conclusions of staff hearing examiners and expert consultants hired by Range that the gas in the water wells likely came from the Strawn geological formation.

The Strawn is only a few hundred feet deep and much shallower than the Barnett Shale.

The two Range wells tapped into natural gas deposits more than a mile below the groundwater aquifer that is the supply source for the contaminated water wells of the Lipsky and Hayley families in the upscale Silverado subdivision in far south Parker County.

Methane is the primary component of natural gas.

After the vote, Commissioners Elizabeth Ames Jones, Michael Williams and David Porter ripped into the EPA, with Jones calling the agency's investigation of the well contamination and Dec. 7 emergency enforcement order against Range an example of "haste makes waste."

Williams later said, "I firmly believe in the core of my soul" that the EPA officials are "looking at a way to limit hydraulic fracturing and make a frontal assault on domestic natural gas production."

There has been a national debate as to whether "fracking" is a serious threat to groundwater contamination.

In the fracturing process, huge volumes of water and sand, along with a much-smaller volume of chemicals, are pumped under high pressure into a wellbore to create tiny cracks in dense rocks that allow natural gas to flow to the surface. Fracking is used extensively in the Barnett Shale.

Commission hearing examiner Gene Montes said fracking definitely did not contribute to the water well contamination because even the longest fractures would extend no more than 400 feet upward, at least a mile below the aquifer.

The EPA has not contended that fracking caused the well contamination, but the case has drawn national attention at a time when environmental issues related to gas drilling are a hot topic.

Some shallow gas wells were drilled into the Strawn in the early 1980s. Montes said some water wells have also been drilled into the Strawn. He said geochemical fingerprinting analysis of the gas in the contaminated wells indicated that it likely came from the Strawn and that it didn't match Barnett Shale gas.

After the commission action, the EPA said in a statement that it "stands by the order issued to Range" and noted that the U.S. Department of Justice had filed a case in federal court "to enforce EPA's emergency order under the Safe Drinking Water Act."

The Railroad Commission decision "is not supported by EPA's independent, scientific investigation," which concluded that Range "contributed to the contamination of homeowners' drinking water wells," the federal agency said.

However, a top EPA regional enforcement official, John Blevins, would say only that Range's gas wells "may" have caused or contributed to the contamination when he was questioned under oath in a previous deposition taken by a Range attorney.

The EPA declined to present information about its investigation of Range at a January hearing conducted by Railroad Commission staff.

The EPA said Tuesday that it "believes that natural gas plays a key role in our nation's clean-energy future.

However, we want to make sure natural gas development is done safely and with public health as a first priority."

Range said after the vote that it expects "the EPA to rescind their order now that there is definitive scientific evidence" of the contamination's cause.

The EPA drew strong criticism from state Rep. Jim Keffer, R-Eastland, who is chairman of the House Energy Resources Committee and represents Hood County, the surface location for the two Range wells in question.

Keffer said the EPA's claims against Range are based on "no facts."

"They thought they had a smoking gun, and they didn't," he said. "Now they've fallen on their face. They overstepped. They overreached."

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