

Is this just a presage of what we might “welcome” if gas exploration comes to our Catskill and Delaware Watershed?

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## **Wells tested, cause of explosion sought in gas exploration in Susquehanna County**

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Natural gas has mixed with at least three private water supplies near drilling rigs in Susquehanna County, according to information from Cabot Oil & Gas.

Regulators from the state Department of Environmental Protection and Cabot officials are collecting samples and analyzing the geology in Dimock Township to see whether nearby drilling operations into the gas-rich Marcellus Shale are to blame.

"We're looking at this as a serious situation, and we want to find out why it happened," said DEP spokesman Mark Carmon.

The tests come in the wake of a Jan. 1 explosion that shattered an 8-foot wide cement slab at Norma Fiorento's house on Route 2024.

Investigators from the state and Cabot tested basements and water wells of at least six homes near drilling rigs. No gas was detected in basements, although it was found in the Fiorento well and two others, according to Kenneth Kamorowski, a spokesman for Cabot Oil & Gas.

Officials, concerned about residents' safety, said they will track the gas to its source. While the gas, found in trace amounts, does not pose a threat for drinking, officials want to find out whether it is a sign of a larger problem, Kamorowski said.

"We don't have an answer," he said. "We've checked our pipelines and equipment, and they are not leaking."

As testing continued this week, samples were sent to labs, which may take another week or more to produce results, Carmon said.

Cabot, of Houston, is in the middle of an intensive effort to develop the Marcellus in the rural township just south of Montrose, with more than 15 wells completed or under way and more than 60 wells expected by the end of this year. The Marcellus, a mile or so deep, runs under the Southern Tier, Pennsylvania and the Appalachian basin.

Intensive drilling into the Marcellus is an obvious suspect of the gas problem in Dimock, but not the only one.

Natural gas, or methane, is produced by decomposing organic material. It can move through shallow layers of earth and collect on its own in enclosed spaces of unvented wells.

More detailed analysis of air samples from the Fiorento well will be able to determine whether gas escaped from the Marcellus or other deep geological formations penetrated by drilling rigs, or came from another source, Carmon said.

While there were no injuries associated with the explosion, it left frayed nerves, including those of Pat Farnelli, who lives with her six children and husband between drilling rigs on Carter Road.

They were getting used to the sporadic bangs, booms and thumps reverberating over the Dimock countryside from drilling operations all hours of the day and night, she said.

"We're all real jumpy now," she said Tuesday, shortly after state environmental regulators knocked on her door and asked if they could test her water for natural gas hazards.

Dimock residents, meanwhile, are learning what it's like to live over the middle of a developing natural gas field. While welcoming the prospects of royalty payments that will flow their way as dozens of wells come on line this year, they hadn't expected the other consequences.

This is the third investigation the DEP is conducting involving environmental issues related to drilling in Dimock.

Contractors are cleaning the remnants from a diesel fuel spill at a drilling site last spring. Work crews are evaluating the extent of contamination in the ground after emergency responders contained and vacuumed what they could from the surface.

Additionally, DEP is holding Cabot responsible for polluting a private water well on Carter Road. After testing the water and finding it unfit to drink, Cabot installed a filtration system and began bringing in water from a tanker.

On the other side of the border, Marcellus development in the Southern Tier is effectively on hold while New York state regulators complete an industry-wide review of environmental concerns, including its impact on water.

Drilling operations into another formation, called the Herkimer, have kept Chenango County emergency responders busy in Smyrna. On the same day the Fiorento well exploded, firefighters responded to a conflagration at a Norse Energy drilling rig in the Town of Smyrna. The fire started after a rock hit a fluorescent bulb and ignited natural gas fumes and hydraulic fluid, said Douglas Shattuck, first deputy fire coordinator.

It was contained and extinguished without injuries after crews diverted natural gas fumes from the blaze with a compressor, he said.

