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OIL AND GAS

EPA finds support for relaxing wastewater rules

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EPA is studying uses for the wastewater produced by oil and gas wells. Clinton Steeds/Flickr

EPA says state water regulators and the oil and gas industry generally support relaxing the rules on oil-field wastewater so it can be reused instead of discarded.

So the agency is asking the public what it could do to encourage use of wastewater that's considered a pollutant in many parts of the country.

"In an arid state like Utah, no potential source of water can be ignored," Alan Matheson, executive director of the Utah Department of Environmental Quality, said in an EPA press release yesterday.

Tribal officials are more reluctant, according to a report issued today by EPA as part of its study of wastewater often called "brine" or "produced water." And environmental groups are warning that EPA under President Trump is moving toward allowing oil companies to discharge hazardous wastewater into rivers and streams.

"The science does not yet exist to say it's clean enough to release into rivers and streams or to use for crop irrigation and other public purposes," said Mark Brownstein, senior vice president at the Environmental Defense Fund. "Suggesting otherwise is reckless."

EPA calls its [draft study](#) a "holistic look" at how wastewater "might be returned to beneficial use in the water cycle."

The agency said the study will be finalized this summer, and then EPA will decide what to do next. In its statement yesterday, the agency said that could include regulatory and nonregulatory moves.

EPA will accept public comments on the draft study until July 1.

"EPA looks forward to continued public engagement regarding practical, environmentally sound approaches to encouraging greater reuse and more holistic management of this water," said David Ross, the assistant administrator for the Office of Water.

As part of the public comment process, the agency posed four questions on its webpage for the study, including "non-regulatory steps should EPA take to encourage" additional uses of the wastewater.

Nichole Saunders, an EDF attorney following the issue, worries the question indicates EPA is ready to loosen the rules before it resolves questions about whether wastewater is safe for reuse.

"Why isn't EPA asking what they can do to answer these questions and concerns?" she said.

The wastewater brings up oil and gas from underground formations. The fluid is many times saltier than the ocean, often contains hydrocarbons and can be somewhat radioactive. A small portion of the wastewater is water from hydraulic fracturing that has returned to the surface.

A lot more is coming up because of the surge in oil and gas production in the past decade.

Most of this wastewater is disposed of by pumping it deep into the earth via injection wells. But that presents risks to groundwater, and in some cases injecting large volumes of wastewater underground has led to earthquakes. Oklahoma has been particularly hard hit by such quakes.

Some view disposing of the fluid as wasteful because many parts of the country are experiencing water scarcity.

EPA has been holding meetings and conference calls to hear opinions and expertise on wastewater since announcing the study last year ([Energywire](#), May 3, 2018).

The agency also held a national meeting and accepted written comments.

EPA said some supporters of increased use of wastewater say it could address water shortages and meet water needs in some parts of the country.

While some state regulators supported increased reuse, the report said that others raised concerns about wider use of treated wastewater affecting human health and the environment. They said the composition of the wastewater is largely unknown. And others said they lacked expertise on permitting such discharges and would look to EPA for help.

It also said there is "broad support" within the oil and gas industry for more opportunities to use the water rather than injecting it underground. Such disposal is a significant part of the cost operations of most wells.

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