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DEP, DRILLING INDUSTRY CREATE PARTNERSHIP TO EXPLORE NEW WASTEWATER TREATMENT TECHNOLOGIES

Department Improves, Strengthens Permitting Process

HARRISBURG – The Department of Environmental Protection and the natural gas drilling industry have launched a partnership to explore innovative methods to treat wastewater generated from oil and gas well drilling operations in the commonwealth. Working with the partnership, the department will develop a technology-based standard for total dissolved solids in oil and gas wastewater, to protect rivers and streams. The partnership met for the first time today in Harrisburg.

“The oil and natural gas extraction process generates brine and wastewater that can contain high concentrations of salt and total dissolved solids that are diluted and discharged into surface waters after treatment to remove pollutants,” said Environmental Protection acting Secretary John Hanger. “The department is committed to working along side the drilling industry to develop new treatment technologies to treat this wastewater that will allow our natural gas industry and our economy to thrive while protecting the health of our rivers and streams.”

Pennsylvania’s streams must assimilate total dissolved solids, or TDS, from a variety of wastewater sources besides oil and gas well drilling. The primary sources of these pollutants are stormwater runoff and pollutant discharges from industrial and sewage treatment plants.

Pennsylvania’s rivers and streams are also burdened by uncontrolled discharges from abandoned coal mines. Some streams already burdened with large TDS loads could reach their limits from the additional demand created by new well drilling activity.

The combination of fluctuating energy prices and Pennsylvania’s proximity to the major population centers of the northeast has created an oil and gas drilling boom in the

commonwealth. DEP has issued a new record 7,792 drilling permits in 2008 with more than 4,100 wells drilled in regions throughout the state.

The partnership was formed as a result of an increasing demand for the treatment and disposal of brine and other wastewater generated from traditional and Marcellus Shale drilling operations. Its goal is to limit surface water discharges from wastewater treatment plants by encouraging the reuse of frac water, locating geologic formations capable of safe deep underground wastewater disposal, and evaluating new and emerging technologies for treating the remaining wastewater. By reusing the frac water, the industry's demand for fresh water withdrawals will decrease. "The rivers and streams of Pennsylvania have a very limited ability to absorb some of the additional wastewater created from the increased development of the Marcellus Shale formation. Additional wastewater treatment facilities and methods will be necessary to accommodate the increased volumes of wastewater from these drilling activities," Hanger added.

The drilling industry and DEP have agreed to develop a long-term strategy for permitting treatment facilities by identifying constituents of concern based on sample well data. This standard will be developed with input from the technology partnership and the public through the department's public participation process.

The partnership is the latest process established by the department to improve the regulatory process and reduce permit processing times. The department is also developing a permit-by-rule for earthmoving and construction which will reduce the permit review time from 150 days to 30 days by requiring best management practices and the extra environmental protection measure of vegetated buffers. To qualify for permit by rule, applicants must:

- Provide public notice and specific notice to the municipality;
- Satisfy local stormwater ordinances and get a letter confirming consistency;
- Have a certified professional engineer or professional geologist develop and seal the Erosion Control Plan and Post Construction Stormwater Control Plans;
- Include vegetated buffers for added stream protection; and
- Utilize BMPs described and included in the BMP manual.

In addition, revisions to the department's permit review process encourage the withdrawal of water from streams during high-flow conditions, providing added protection to the water resources. In response to the increased demand for staff to review permits and inspect sites, DEP has begun to hire additional staff which will be supported by permit application fee increases which were approved by the Environmental Quality Board in December. For more information, visit www.depweb.state.pa.us, keyword: Oil and Gas.

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