

Toxins found at third site as fracking fears build

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TRACES of toxic chemicals have been found at a "fracking" operation to extract coal seam gas - the third time this year that gas producers have detected contamination at a drill site.

Arrow Energy confirmed that benzene, toluene, ethylene and xylene - together known as BTEX - had been found in wells at a gas site east of Mackay, Queensland.

In NSW documents obtained from the Department of Industry and Investment show that a coal seam gas drilling site near Lismore, run by the Sydney company Metgasco, was permitted to use fracking after supplying a generic list of hazardous materials safety guidelines.

Emails between department staff and Metgasco show that testing for coal seam gas using fracking can go ahead without approval being sought or required from the Environment Department.

The practice of fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, involves injecting a mix of water, sand and chemicals underground to force gas to the surface.

Environmental and farming groups have questioned the safety of the technique after reports from the US suggesting fracking chemicals, including BTEX, have contaminated drinking water supplies.

Coal seam gas companies and the industry body the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association say fracking has never been known to contaminate drinking water.

In Queensland Arrow Energy will test water bores in the surrounding area as a precaution, even though the traces, first suspected two weeks ago, are small.

It said BTEX was not used in its fracking chemicals and the contaminants might be traced to diesel used at the drilling site.

In October BTEX was discovered in eight wells at drill sites run by Origin Energy about 300 kilometres west of Brisbane. Earlier this year an underground coal gasification project near Kingaroy, Queensland, was temporarily shut when benzene and toluene were detected.

The NSW Greens are calling for a moratorium on coal seam gas extraction and a public inquiry into its long-term effects.

Emails obtained during a call for papers in the NSW upper house show the Environment Department seeking information about fracking, apparently sparked by recent reports in the Herald.

"The majority of activity is under exploration licences across NSW, [the department] has very limited experience and involvement," one exchange reads. "I think that a briefing on [fracking] fluids really needs to come from [the Department of Industry and Investment] and/or industry."

Cate Faehrmann, a Greens MP, said the department appeared to do little more than apply a "rubber-stamping exercise" to fracking applications.