

State links northeast Ohio quakes to injection wells

Written by Joe Vardon | The Columbus Dispatch
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The Kasich administration has put a temporary stop to the disposal of waste from oil and natural-gas drilling in wells within a 5-mile radius of a particular Youngstown well — a well believed to be the cause of 11 earthquakes since March, including a 4.0 quake that struck around 3 p.m. yesterday.

Officials from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources think that waste pumped into the Youngstown-area well, referred to as Northstar No. 1, has been seeping into a previously unknown fault line in eastern Ohio, causing the seismic activity. The moratorium, issued yesterday by Jim Zehringer, the Natural Resources Department's director, affects four other injection wells.

"The 5-mile radius, we were told by our geologists, is an adequate buffer zone" for the fault line, Zehringer said. "There are four other wells, none of them active, but we're not going to allow any activity to take place in these wells."

Michael Hansen, of the Ohio Seismic Network, said that even though Northstar No. 1 was shut down Friday, there is still potential for more quakes, although the magnitude of yesterday's quake may have relieved some of the pressure near the fault line.

There are 177 injection wells throughout the state. Zehringer and other officials, speaking on a New Year's Eve conference call, said the single Youngstown well is the only one of its kind that's been related to seismic activity since the state started using them in the 1970s.

Kasich officials also stressed that the months-long shaking in Youngstown is not a result of hydraulic fracking — a procedure used to extract oil and gas out of rock formations such as the Marcellus and Utica shale. Discoveries of oil and gas in the shale rock in eastern Ohio has sparked hopes for an economic boon in the state's Appalachian region.

State Sen. Bob Hagan, D-Youngstown, called for a statewide moratorium on injection wells.

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Hagan said he asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to intervene because of the possibility of another quake.

“We don’t want to overreact,” said Zehringer, who suggested that a wider moratorium in well activity “could devastate the economic livelihood of thousands of Ohioans.”

The magnitude 4.0 quake that struck yesterday afternoon in McDonald, outside Youngstown, is the largest of the 11 quakes that originated there, Hansen said.

Residents said a boom accompanied the shaking yesterday. Sheriff’s dispatchers from several counties in the area said there were no immediate reports of damage.

Rick Simmers, chief of oil and gas management for the ODNR, said a daily average of about 5,000 42-gallon barrels of brine water — a byproduct of oil and gas drilling — were pumped into the well, down to 9,200 feet. He said a majority of the water comes from Pennsylvania wells.

Gov. John Kasich, who is vacationing with his family in Florida for the holidays, was in constant contact with Zehringer and other senior staff members throughout the day yesterday, communications director Scott Milburn said. “The governor directed director Zehringer to put public health and safety first and to make a response that is reasonable and appropriate and based on science,” Milburn said.

The well’s owner, Northstar Disposal Services LLC, which agreed to stop injecting brine into the well on Friday, applied for and received licensing under the Strickland administration, Kasich spokesman Rob Nichols said. The No. 1 well has been active since December, 2010, according to Nichols.

Information from The Plain Dealer was included in this story.

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