

*Washington, DC* - The U.S. House of Representatives today approved a provision authored by Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) that formally urges the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to conduct a new study on the risks that hydraulic fracturing poses to drinking water supplies. The Senate is due to pass the identical bill in the coming days and President Obama is expected to sign the measure into law soon after that. Earlier this week, members of the Interior Appropriations Conference Committee, including Hinchey, signed off on the Interior and Environment Appropriations bill and report for fiscal year 2010, which contains the study provision.

"While natural gas certainly has an important role in our national energy policy, it's imperative that we take every step possible to ensure that our drinking water supplies are not contaminated or adversely impacted in any way," Hinchey said. "This legislation puts Congress on record in support of a new, comprehensive study that will examine the impact that hydraulic fracking really has on our water supplies. The study results will put us in a position to take any further steps that are necessary to protect our drinking water supplies from the chemical concoctions being pumped into the ground by energy companies."

In May, the congressman asked EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson at a House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee hearing about the need for such a study. Jackson told Hinchey that she believed her agency should review the risk that fracturing poses to drinking water in light of various cases across the country that raise questions about the safety of the natural gas drilling practice. Hinchey's measure would formalize that congressional request for an EPA study on the risks that toxic chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing pose to drinking water supplies in New York and across the nation. The EPA did conduct a study on the matter in 2004 under the Bush administration, but that study is widely considered to be flawed for a variety of reasons, including the way data was selectively collected from sources that had a vested interest in the oil and gas industry while other relevant information was ignored.

The language that Hinchey had inserted into the report reads, "The conferees urge the EPA to carry out a study on the relationship between hydraulic fracturing and drinking water, using a credible approach that relies on the best available science, as well as independent sources of information. The conferees expect the study to be conducted through a transparent, peer-reviewed process that will ensure the validity and accuracy of the data. EPA shall consult with other federal agencies as well as appropriate state and interstate regulatory agencies in carrying out the study, and it should be prepared in accordance with EPA quality assurance principles."

In the now infamous 2005 Energy Policy Act, which Hinchey strongly opposed and voted against, the then Republican-controlled Congress exempted hydraulic fracturing from the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA), which was designed to protect people's water supply from contamination from toxic materials. This loophole, which some have called the Halliburton Loophole, created an extremely dangerous set of circumstances.

In June, Hinchey, Congresswoman Diana DeGette (D-CO), and several of his colleagues introduced the FRAC ACT -- Fracturing Responsibility and Awareness of Chemicals Act, which would close the loophole that exempted hydraulic fracturing from the SDWA and require the oil and gas industry to disclose the chemicals they use in their hydraulic fracturing processes. Currently, the oil and gas industry is the only industry granted an exemption from complying with the SDWA.

"It is critical that our communities are assured that the process of hydraulic fracturing is safe and will not contaminate drinking water supplies," said DeGette (D-CO), Vice Chair of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. "I will continue to work with EPA to encourage a robust study of hydraulic fracturing and its potential impact on drinking water."

Hydraulic fracturing, also known as "fracking," is used in almost all natural gas wells. It is a process whereby fluids are injected at high pressure into underground rock formations to blast them open and increase the flow of fossil fuels. This injection of unknown and potentially toxic chemicals often occurs near drinking water sources. Troubling incidents have occurred around the country where people became ill after fracking operations began in their communities. Some chemicals that are known to have been used in fracking include diesel fuel, benzene, industrial solvents, and other carcinogens and endocrine disrupters.