

*Washington, DC* - In an important step forward, the House Appropriations Committee last night approved a provision authored by Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) that would formally urge the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to conduct a new study on the risks that hydraulic fracturing for natural gas exploration and drilling pose to drinking water supplies. The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, of which Hinchey is a member, approved the congressman's language last week as part of the report accompanying the Interior Appropriations bill for fiscal year 2010. Now that the full House Appropriations Committee passed the bill and report, the measure now moves to the floor where it will be voted on by the full House as early as next week.

"We're now one important step closer toward securing a new, unbiased EPA study on the risks that hydraulic fracturing pose to our nation's drinking water supplies," Hinchey said. "As we enter a period in time when we may very well see a dramatic increase in natural gas drilling, it's important that we have policies in place that will safeguard our drinking water supplies so that we don't destroy one natural resource while pursuing another. Natural gas drilling should be allowed, but it must be done in a way that is environmentally sound."

Hinchey's provision comes one month after the congressman asked EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson at an Interior 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 simply 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 Committee is concerned about the risks posed to drinking water from hydraulic fracturing. The Committee questions whether past reviews by the Agency relied on independent sources of information and the best available science. The Committee urges EPA to review the risks that hydraulic fracturing poses to drinking water using the best available science, as well as independent sources of information."

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, 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.

Last week, Hinchey, Congresswoman Diana DeGette (D-CO), and several of his colleagues introduced the FRAC ACT -- Fracking Responsibility and Awareness of Chemicals Act, which would close the loophole that exempted hydraulic fracturing from the Safe Drinking Water Act. The FRAC Act would also 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 Safe Drinking Water Act.

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 wells. 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.