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Tioga test well leaves methane leak

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OWEGO — A test well in Tioga County's swath of the Marcellus Shale yielded mixed results for a Texas-based energy company.

The vertical well, drilled by a contractor for Carrizo Oil & Gas Inc. in October 2012 to test the area's potential for shale gas drilling, produced "fairly encouraging" information about the geology beneath Tioga County, said company spokesman Richard Hunter.

But it also left behind a methane leak the company is now working to fix at the request of the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

A rig crew working on Carrizo's behalf arrived this week at the drill pad — located about 8½ miles from the Pennsylvania border off McHenry Road in the Town of Owego — to repair the well, Hunter said.

"It is a tremendous amount of effort for something that would not be even called to our attention anywhere else," he said. "We're going to do our best to take care of it."

The exploratory well was not hydraulically fractured, a natural gas extraction process off limits in New York pending a five-year DEC review.

Well inspection reports obtained by Tioga County resident Gerri Wiley through a Freedom of In-

formation Law request, and provided to this newspaper, show DEC became aware of a leak days after drilling was completed last fall.

Following the drilling process, the well was plugged on Oct. 19, the reports state. Three days later, a DEC inspector found water at the well site was bubbling and questioned members of the on-site drilling crew, who "were not aware of the bubbling," the inspection reports state.

The next day, on Oct. 23, a Carrizo employee told a DEC inspector he believed the gas was not flammable based on a digital meter reading.

"They plan to continue to monitor it," the DEC inspector's notes state. "The bubbles are currently too many to count."

The well inspection reports show apparent uncertainty about how to handle the leak last fall.

In the last entry, dated Nov. 13, the inspector says leakage was averaging 20 cubic feet per day. A Carrizo employee asked whether it would be okay to abandon the well after installing a pipe to vent the methane.

"I told him I did not know," the inspector's notes state, "and that N.Y. has no specific regulatory guidelines about the (matter)."

DEC spokeswoman Emily DeSantis said the agency has no regulatory guidance that would allow the use of vent pipes to

permanently vent a well after plugging.

"DEC's position has been and continues to be that the well needs remedial work if the well is leaking oil or gas after plugging operations have taken place," she said in a statement.

DeSantis said the agency discussed the leak and options for repairing it with the company in November 2012, and "determined that it should be monitored."

"DEC's discussions with the operator continued until February 2013, when DEC directed the company to perform remedial work to replug the well," DeSantis said.

Hunter said the current correctional work at the well will involve excavating part of the cement, and working to eliminate the leak if possible. He was unable to explain why remedial work began months after DEC's direction.

"We began work this month," he said. "I don't know when they told us."

Hunter said the leak likely developed as a result of methane near the surface migrating through an area called the "annulus," between the edge of the well bore and the first level of casing, which is filled with cement.

He characterized the size of the leak as "extremely insignificant" — less than what a compost pile would produce.