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Fracking safety studies require US parameters

We've been led to believe that fracking is a responsible oil-extraction process that has a near-perfect record of environmental safety. A survey of drilling-related complaints in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Texas suggests that's not the case.

That revelation supports California's recently toughened review procedure for fracking, an ever-expanding practice that has been heralded as one of the chief factors in America's march toward oil self-sufficiency.

But the inconsistency of the data suggests another issue: reporting parameters differ from state to state. Relatively minor problems with water wells are tallied as essentially the statistical equivalent of grievous contamination. The federal EPA must work with states to create a consistent reporting protocol that helps determine the depth of the problem and lays a foundation for industry and regulators to establish best practices.

The inconsistent parameters of complaint collection aren't helpful to the pro-fracking oil industry or to its critics.

After requesting data on drilling-related complaints in those four states, the Associated Press discovered "major differences" in how states report problems. Texas provided details on reported issues, while the other states provided next to nothing -- just "general outlines," the AP reported. Pennsylvania alone received nearly 400 complaints in 2013 alleging that oil or natural gas drilling polluted or affected private wells (compared with 499 the year before). Those complaints have included short-term diminished water flow and pollution from stray gas; more than 100 such cases have been confirmed over the past five years.

Fracking's benefits are evident: The practice maximizes production in the oil patch and positions the U.S. to remain a net oil exporter increasingly independent from fickle foreign suppliers -- a position once thought highly unlikely. Another positive result has been hundreds of billions of dollars in corporate profits. But no degree of independence or profit justifies widespread contamination. We owe it to ourselves to study such allegations, and to do so accurately, we'll need a consistent reporting and tabulation protocol.