



When the Environmental Protection Agency abruptly retreated on its multimillion-dollar investigation into water contamination in a central Wyoming natural gas field last month, it shocked environmentalists and energy industry supporters alike.

In 2011, the agency had issued a blockbuster draft report saying that the controversial practice of fracking was to blame for the pollution of an aquifer deep below the town of Pavillion, Wy. – the first time such a claim had been based on a scientific analysis.

The study drew heated criticism over its methodology and awaited a peer review that promised to settle the dispute. Now the EPA will instead hand the study over to the state of Wyoming, whose research will be funded by EnCana, the very drilling company whose wells may have caused the contamination.

Industry advocates say the EPA's turnabout reflects an overdue recognition that it had over-reached on fracking and that its science was critically flawed.

But environmentalists see an agency that is systematically disengaging from any research that could be perceived as questioning the safety of fracking or oil drilling, even as President Obama lays out a plan to combat climate change that rests heavily on the use of natural gas.

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