

The Denver Post

Breached well fuels feud with gas firm

Woman had tumor after blowup

By Nancy Lofholm
Denver Post Staff Writer

Friday, February 18, 2005 -

Laura Amos was no environmental crusader until the metal top blew off her rural water well in May 2001, making it look like a geyser.

A gas company had been drilling on a property about 100 yards from her home south of Silt when Amos' water well blew. Soon after that, her water turned bubbly and gray and had a nasty smell.

Since then, Amos' fight to have her water cleaned up has evolved into a battle for her health and a brawl with the natural-gas industry in a county that has had 862 new drilling permits issued since the beginning of 2004 and has had several other documented instances of gas-industry operations contaminating wells and spring water.

Amos, with her no-nonsense approach and dogged research, is becoming known as the Erin Brockovich of Garfield County.

In fact, her allegations that EnCana Corp. contaminated her well with toxic chemicals that led to her developing a rare tumor have attracted the interest of the lawyer who helped Brockovich win a movie-worthy battle against corporate water polluters in California's San Joaquin Valley.

"I finally screamed loud enough that I guess I got some attention," said Amos, who went before the Northwest Colorado Oil & Gas Forum meeting in Rifle on Wednesday with some new ammunition.

Amos, a 42-year-old outfitter, has taken her tale to the forum previously.

But her story gained a new twist with the recent revelation that a chemical called 2-BE was used near her home in a process called hydraulic fracturing, or "fracing" (pronounced "fracking"). Fracing involves pumping fluids under high pressure into the ground to break apart formations where gas is trapped.

For more than a year, officials with EnCana, the company that owns the wells near Amos' home, denied that EnCana had used the chemical.

After Amos' well blew, her family drank water hauled in by EnCana for about three months. The family began using its well water again when the smell and fizzing subsided. No further testing was done on the well for about 2 1/2 years.

Amos' health began to deteriorate two years after the disruption to her water well. A rare adrenal-gland tumor was found, and the gland was removed in 2003. Amos began looking into the chemicals used in the fracing.

Amos first learned about 2-BE from a memo sent to public land managers in Delta County in 2002. In it, zoologist Theo Colborn warned about the potential impacts of 2-BE that might be used in methane gas wells planned there. It has not been tested in humans, but studies in rodents have linked 2-BE to adrenal-gland tumors.

Colborn has been sounding warnings for years about the health effects of exposure to man-made chemicals such as 2-BE.

Amos called Colborn through contacts at the Environmental Protection Agency and was able to confirm that the fracking contractor for EnCana had used 2-BE in an experimental operation 38 days after the initial blowup of Amos' water well. That fracking had taken place at a relatively shallow 2,300 feet, a level corresponding to the aquifer that feeds Amos' water well.

"It's very, very difficult to say, 'Yes, this caused the problem,'" Colborn said. "But it sent chills up and down my spine when (Amos) called me."

The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission last year cited EnCana for contaminating Amos' well. The company was not fined, but the case is considered open and fines have not been ruled out. There was no specific mention of 2-BE or other fracking chemicals, which are often kept secret because the formulas are considered proprietary.

Morris Bell, deputy director of operations for the commission, said what fracking contractors put into the ground is not regulated and does not need to be divulged. The chemicals are regulated only once they are pumped back out of the ground and must be disposed of, Bell said.

EnCana spokeswoman Florence Murphy would not comment directly on Amos' allegations. Instead, she pointed to several findings in a recent letter from the commission to Amos' family: that the 2-BE was used more than a month after the initial impact to the well; that remediation had been done and the suspect well sealed up; and that Amos' exposure could have come from household cleaning products.

The commission noted that when the fracking with 2-BE was done, there was no pressure drop that would indicate a breach with an aquifer. It also noted that no fracking compounds were found in the water several months after the initial disruption to the well.

Murphy said she knows of no other instances where EnCana's subcontractors have used 2-BE for fracking in Garfield County.

Denver lawyer Lance Astrella said he is well aware of Amos' case as part of an overall review he and California lawyer Tom Gerardi, who represented Brockovich, are doing of possible aquifer pollution in Garfield County.

"I don't think enough attention is being paid to what's being put in the ground out there," Astrella said. "We're taking a look at it to see how extensive the problem is. We're looking at property damage and health issues."

Staff writer Nancy Lofholm can be reached at 970-256-1957 or nlofholm@denverpost.com.