

# Will there be more accidents as drilling increases?

Saturday, February 26, 2011 12:02 AM

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At least three workers have died in accidents at Marcellus Shale drilling sites between 2008 and 2011, according to former state Department of Environmental Protection Secretary [John R. Hanger](#).

And during Mr. Hanger's tenure the DEP responded to roughly 45 emergencies at Marcellus locations.

But Mr. Hanger does not believe that the number of major incidents such as explosions or fires will mushroom along with the anticipated exponential growth of the Marcellus industry statewide.

The hope is that the number of incidents such as [Wednesday's flash fire](#) at a [Chesapeake Energy Corp.](#) drilling site in Avella that injured three contract workers will drop.

"I believe the industry has the challenge of decreasing the number of emergencies as they increase the amount of drilling," said Mr. Hanger, who is a lawyer in the private sector.

Government must have strong rules and apply them in order to create an environment in which companies focus on enhancing safety, Mr. Hanger said, using the nuclear energy and mining industries as examples.

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"Coal companies in Pennsylvania have deeply embraced safety," he said, noting that in 2010, the Pennsylvania mining industry recorded its first year of zero fatalities.

But he noted that with Marcellus Shale companies, "from where I sit, it absolutely is not where it needs to be in every case. . . . And when the guard is let down on safety, that's when problems happen."

The Chesapeake fire is the latest serious incident involving casualties related to Marcellus drilling. Mr. Hanger did not have specific information regarding the fatalities that he cited.

But the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration has an ongoing investigation into [the Dec. 9 death](#) of a West Penn Energy Services LLC worker in Armstrong County. The worker

was using a propane torch at the company's operational facility to thaw frozen valves on a tanker containing brine water from a Marcellus site when an explosion occurred, according to OSHA.

And the agency fined [Helmerich & Payne International Drilling Co.](#) of Tulsa, Okla., \$5,000 for an April death at a Marcellus site in Sycamore, Greene County. A high-pressure ball valve blew apart and fatally struck the worker in the head, OSHA said. A company representative could not be reached for comment.

In June, a Marcellus well operated by EOG Resources near the Moshannon State Forest in rural Clearfield County experienced [a "blowout" that spewed](#) 35,000 gallons of brine and frack fluids into the air for 16 hours.

OSHA's local office has spent the past few years preparing its inspectors for oil and gas issues, said Robert Szymanski, OSHA's area director in Pittsburgh.

But Mr. Szymanski said accidents at Marcellus sites are not much different from those at any other drilling site.

DEP spokesman John Repetz said the number of major incidents has not tracked with the increase in drilling over the past few years, though he could not cite any statistics.

Steve Forde, a spokesman for the [Marcellus Shale Coalition](#), which counts among its 170-odd members Chesapeake Energy, sees Wednesday's fire -- which made national news -- as both a black eye and an opportunity.

"It's an unfortunate incident, and I think everyone involved acknowledges that," Mr. Forde said. "It also is an opportunity for the industry to renew its focus on workplace safety and environmental protection, which has been our top goal as stated in our guiding principles."

Mr. Forde said the industry is keenly aware that a strong track record for safety is vital.

"If we can't get that job done and continue working toward that goal then there's no way we can get this historic opportunity right in the Marcellus."

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