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## Opinion

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Avoidable water woes

Alaska can avoid Lower 48 trouble with strong water quality measures

Fourth in a series

Huge amounts of water must be pumped from coal seams to let methane gas flow to the surface. Often water from coal seams is heavy with minerals or other contaminants that kill vegetation or ruin streams. In some places, gas drillers pump water from aquifers used to supply water to homes, farms or ranches. Water levels in those wells may drop, and high methane levels can build up in the remaining water. Unless owners had their water analyzed before gas drilling, it's difficult to prove that gas drilling caused the problem.

Alaska can avoid these water disputes if the state has the political will to insist on appropriate measures. Four steps are necessary:

- Require water to be pumped back underground.

In Wyoming's Powder River Basin, home to more than 10,500 coal bed methane wells, most water is discharged on the surface. Often full of salt and other minerals, those discharges have provoked widespread conflict with farmers, ranchers, wildlife advocates and even Montana, Wyoming's downstream neighbor. In the San Juan basin of western New Mexico and Colorado, however, most coal bed water is reinjected deep underground. There, the fallout from coal bed water production is much more manageable.

In Alaska, the leading coal bed methane company, Evergreen Resources, could ask for permission to discharge on the surface if the water is clean enough. But chief executive officer Mark Sexton wants no part of the controversy that would produce. In Alaska, he says, all of Evergreen's water will be reinjected.

Injection wells are not cheap. Each well can cost \$1 million to \$2 million. And they are not foolproof. One reinjection well in the San Juan basin was shut down after strange pressure variations occurred and a hot spring started flowing noticeably hotter and faster. That hot spring was nine miles away from the injection well, which speaks to how difficult it can be to know exactly what is going on underground.

Alaska shouldn't rely on the discretionary decisions of one operator to protect our waters from contamination. The state should bar surface disposal.

- Ban diesel fuel in hydraulic fracturing.

Gas drillers commonly try to boost production from coal seams by pumping a slurry underground at high pressure to crack the coal and release more gas. The process, known as hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," often uses diesel fuel as a gelling agent. Some critics worry that the diesel could contaminate underground aquifers. A preliminary study by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found no cause for concern, but anti-pollution advocates have attacked the agency's findings.

Evergreen says it won't use diesel, because it has found a more effective alternative. Alaska ought to ban the controversial "fracking" additive.

- Ban gas drillers from pumping water out of drinking water aquifers.

Alaska does not have explicit authority to ban this practice, according to Robert Crandall of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. The state should. This is simply a common sense rule. The underground water deposit is being used by someone else. A gas drilling company shouldn't be allowed to come along and grab someone else's property.

Evergreen says this shouldn't be a problem in Alaska. Coals in the Mat-Su are much deeper than in the Powder River Basin, where the coal is near the surface and gas drilling more commonly works the same water vein as drinking wells. A ban on pumping from drinking water aquifers should cause no hardship for the industry in Alaska.

- Aggressively gather baseline information in areas where gas drilling will take place.

"The need for baseline studies cannot be overstated," according to the consultant who studied U.S. coal bed methane development for the province of Alberta. Otherwise, regulators are left "trying to resolve arising issues with insufficient background information."

In Alaska, property owners near gas drilling sites and coal outcrops need a low- or no-cost way to get their drinking wells checked for water flow rates and for methane and other chemicals. There also needs to be a central repository, where the water well information is readily available to anyone who needs it. The state needs to make sure it has up-to-date maps of coal outcrops, where conflicts with water wells are most likely. Injection wells need close state monitoring.

As Dan Randolph of San Juan Citizens Alliance in Durango, Colo., says, "What is underground is an unknown. We're dealing with a black box ... both with (water) injection wells and (gas) producing wells. ... We won't know the consequences for a long time. ... It's a huge, very complex system."

BOTTOM LINE: Avoiding water woes is in everyone's interests. The state should lead the effort.

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