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[**DEP: Drillers extract thousands of tons of ‘hot’ rocks in Pa.**](http://www.tribune-democrat.com/local/x787237161/DEP-Drillers-extract-thousands-of-tons-of-hot-rocks-in-Pa)

**John Finnerty**[CNHI State Reporter](http://www.tribune-democrat.com/)

HARRISBURG — Environmental watchdogs say a system for tracking radioactive material unearthed during gas drilling depends too much on the industry’s self-policing, making it impossible to judge how much waste is generated or how dangerous it might be.

Their concern centers on cuttings – the rock unearthed during the drilling process.

The deepest rocks are sometimes radioactive. They may become more volatile when exposed to chemicals used during fracking, the popular process for releasing underground reservoirs of natural gas, said Nadia Steinzor, program coordinator for the Oil and Gas Accountability Project of the nonprofit group Earthworks.

During 2012, an estimated 4,175 tons of cuttings were radioactive, said Morgan Wagner, a state Department of Environmental Protection spokeswoman. The DEP does not have an estimate for how much radioactive material was unearthed last year, Wagner said.

Environmentalists say the state’s estimates, when they exist, are difficult to verify.

“We don’t know the scope of the problem,” said Adam Garber, field director for PennEnvironment. “… It’s only (going) to get worse.”

Responding to such concerns, DEP has launched a $1 million study to measure where radioactive materials are turning up and how they are handled, Wagner said. As of the end of last year, researchers had visited 114 locations across the state and collected close to 1,000 samples. DEP is expected to release the findings this summer.

Mark Pedersen, president of the Pennsylvania Waste Industries Association, which represents haulers and landfill operators, said those who manage waste from the drilling operations believe there are sufficient checks in place.

“There are two to three sets of eyes on everything,” Pedersen said.

Environmentalists say a handful of episodes have heightened concerns about drilling waste.

Two years ago, state regulators identified “several containers” of waste which were so radioactive that state officials required it to be moved out of state, Wagner said. Those 308 tons of waste ultimately were sent to a facility for radioactive waste disposal in Idaho. Wagner said the problem came to light when the drilling company submitted paperwork seeking to move the waste to a landfill, which is the most common way that radioactive waste is identified.

In April 2012, a Westmoreland County landfill rejected a load of drilling waste when it triggered a radiation alarm. That load also reportedly was shipped to Idaho.

Earlier this month, regulators in North Dakota reported finding black trash bags stuffed with radioactive “drilling socks” – filters used to strain liquid during the drilling process. The Pennsylvania DEP is studying the use and disposal of the same type of filters as part of its study.

A DEP website that tracks the disposal of Marcellus Shale waste includes no reference to either the 2012 or 2013 Idaho shipments. Steinzor said that data gap is typical because the state’s system relies on self-reporting by gas drillers.

Data provided by drilling companies show a staggering amount of waste.

Pennsylvania landfills last year accepted 785,000 tons of drill cuttings. Another 81,000 tons were shipped across the border into New York.

Residents there must confront the irony that their state has a moratorium on fracking because of its perceived environmental threat, but New York still accepts waste from drilling in Pennsylvania, said Gary Alexander. An attorney, Alexander represents residents who’ve been fighting to stop the Chemung County Landfill from taking Pennsylvania’s drilling waste.

Alexander estimated that a third of the waste going into the Chemung landfill comes from drilling in Pennsylvania. The DEP database shows the landfill accepted 58,000 tons of drill cuttings last year.

Landfill operators have an incentive to accept that waste, Alexander said. Cuttings are four times heavier than normal garbage, and landfills charge by weight.

That incentive also raises questions about how vigilant landfill operators are when it comes to identifying waste they should refuse, he said.

It’s a concern shared by residents throughout Pennsylvania. With such a large volume of waste material in the state, Steinzor said there is concern that some of it might be mishandled along the way.

Pedersen said drilling and gas companies in Pennsylvania are required to determine whether their waste is radioactive. They send paperwork to DEP that describes the waste and indicates where it’s being sent, he said. Once state regulators give their blessing, the waste can proceed to a landfill.