Frackquakes Migrating to Northwest Kansas

By Joe Spease, Chairman, Hydraulic Fracturing Committee

Earthquakes believed to be attributed to disposal of oil and gas waste fluids into injection wells in Northwest Kansas are occurring more frequently. In recent weeks there have been 4 quakes registering a magnitude of 3.0 and higher near Ellis County. 8 quakes have been registered overall.

The Kansas Geological Survey (KGS) believes it is possible that disposal into injection wells is causing the quakes. More study will be needed, but the quakes are similar to those that have caused serious damage to property in South Central Kansas over the last 4 years. Like South Central Kansas quakes, the ones in Northwest Kansas have occurred at shallow depths ranging from 1-5 kilometers. Natural quakes usually occur at depths far greater, usually at 50 km and deeper.

Like South Central Kansas, in Northwest Kansas, especially around Ellis County, there are fault lines that, when affected by the disposal of fracking fluids into injection wells near the fault lines, will result in quakes. In an interview with KSN-TV, Fort Hays State University professor of geology, Dr. Hendratta Ali said, “We’re used to tornadoes around here, but definitely not used to earthquakes.” She went on to say that there is no way to tell, without more study, if larger quakes can be expected. She then confirmed that there are fault lines underground beneath Ellis County.

One question that many citizens in Ellis County are asking is, “What insurance is available to protect our property?” Now that earthquakes are established, it will be harder to find affordable insurance.

The issue of insurance and compensation for damages to property is sure to be raised in the next legislative session in Topeka. Historically, Kansas has averaged about 1 earthquake per year and those were typically small. With frackquakes over the last 4 years now increasing to hundreds per year the damages to property are skyrocketing. One petroleum geologist estimates the damages to property in the “frackquake corridor,” which runs from north Texas through Oklahoma into Kansas, at $1-$2 billion. Much of that damage is not insured since insurance companies claim that the quakes are man-made. Oil and gas companies say that it is impossible to punish them for damages since no one can point to a particular injection of their toxic waste fluids as the cause of a particular quake. Yet the United States Geological Survey (USGS) has declared in scientific studies that disposing of fracking waste fluids into injection wells near fault lines is indeed the cause of the frackquakes.

Something must be done to help people who have dangerous cracks in their foundations, walls, windows, roads, bridges, public buildings, and more. It is important that people contact their state representatives and senators, and the commissioners at the Kansas Corporation Commission (KCC) which is the regulatory agency for oil and gas in Kansas. Anyone can call or email the Kansas Sierra Club for guidance.

The KCC has taken action to bring some relief to Kansans in the central part of the state where frackquakes have been severe and frequent. The KCC passed an Order which reduced the amount of fracking waste fluids that could be disposed into injection wells in South Central Kansas. Since that Order was passed, the number of frackquakes has decreased. So, we should take care to learn from that experience before the damages from frackquakes in Northwest Kansas climb higher.

We are fairly certain that we know the cause of the newest quakes. Now we need the support of the legislature and the KCC to protect Kansans from brutal damages to property from frackquakes. To begin with we are starting a petition to bring to the KCC calling for another Order to stop the use of problem injection wells in Northwest Kansas. The Sierra Club will work hard to protect people from this environmental threat.

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