

January 23, 2012 10:10 AM

Fracking in Kan. pushes water permits to new high

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Even as sections of Kansas struggled with drought last year, oil exploration companies pushed into the state to drill for oil and gas with horizontal hydraulic fracturing, a method that relies on water.

The burst of drilling pushed temporary water permits for oil and gas exploration in Kansas to a nearly 30-year high. Chelsea Good, spokeswoman for the Kansas Division of Water Resources, said the division received more than 600 applications for temporary water permits for oil and gas exploration in 2011 and approved all but two. Those were turned down because of a lack of water in the area, she said.

"This is the largest number they have received for that type of application since the 1980s," Good said.

Chesapeake Energy and SandRidge Energy, both based in Oklahoma City, are among a number of oil and gas companies that have been acquiring leases to thousands of acres in Kansas along a geologic formation called the Mississippian, where they have begun drilling for oil and gas using horizontal hydraulic fracturing, often known as fracking.

Versions of fracking, which involves pumping large quantities of water, sand and chemicals into the well to open cracks and help oil and gas flow to the surface, have been around for decades in Kansas, where it was pioneered in the 1940s. But the type previously used in Kansas was vertical fracking, which requires considerably less water than horizontal fracking, according to the Kansas Geological Survey.

A vertically fracked well would use about 10,000 to 50,000 gallons of water, said Dave Newell, a research geologist with KGS.

A horizontal well would require about 2.7 million gallons of water in Kansas, SandRidge spokesman Kevin White said. His company has about 1.4 million acres in Kansas for drilling and expects to have at least 57 wells in the state by the end of the year, he said.

At least some of the water for those wells would likely come from area waterways, many of which were likely affected by the yearlong drought. Federal drought disaster declarations were issued for 79 Kansas counties in 2011, according to the Kansas Water Office. Sections of southwest Kansas remained under a drought emergency this month.

SandRidge has so far drilled 10 wells in Harper, Barber and Comanche counties — all of which have been hit by drought in the last year. The company has used surface water from a variety of sources for those wells along with water recycled from other wells in Kansas, White said.

"In spite of the drought, between our ability to recycle and produce water and find basically surface fresh water, we have not had any problem securing water," White said.

Gov. Sam Brownback, a Republican, has appointed a task force to address fracking. Dan Lara, a

spokesman for the task force and for the Kansas Department of Commerce, declined comment Friday on fracking during drought.

"The Mississippian Lime Play has the potential to spur significant economic activity in Kansas, but it also presents challenges that will require thoughtful discussion and preparation," Lara said.

The Kansas Water Office, which coordinates water planning for the state, has announced plans for a February meeting on fracking.

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