

Fact Sheet Regarding Water Discharges From Water Well Drilling and Operation

Prepared by: Utah Division of Water Quality

Updated July 2002

Background:

Utah Administrative Code (UAC) R317-8-2 requires a UPDES discharge permit for the discharge of pollutants from any point source into waters of the State. A point source is defined as “any discernible, confined, and discrete conveyance, including but not limited to any pipe, ditch, channel, tunnel, conduit, well, discrete fissure, container, from which pollutants are or may be discharged.”

Through the use of various drilling methods and reasonable best management practices, water well drilling generally can be conducted such that no discharge occurs or that only de minimis (insignificant) amounts of pollutants would be released into waters of the State. As such, it has been the policy of the Division of Water Quality to not require water well drilling operations to obtain a discharge permit as long as they do not discharge or discharge de minimis amounts of pollutants.

There may be circumstances where a discharge permit is necessary or desired by the well driller or owner. However, because a discharge permit can take several months to issue, requires payment of a permit fee, and because the permit would contain specific enforceable effluent quality limits and frequent self-monitoring and reporting requirements, it is highly recommended that all options to avoid discharge or attain the de minimis discharge be explored before pursuing an individual discharge permit.

Best Management Practices (BMP's)

The goal of BMP implementation is to avoid discharge or, if this is not practicable, to obtain a de minimis pollutant discharge during any phase of well development. The primary pollutants of concern are total suspended solids and turbidity in the form of drill cuttings and muds. Occasionally chemicals such as surfactants are used during the drilling operation. It is the responsibility of the operator and/or owner to assure that BMP's are properly installed and operated in order to contain all fluids or to produce a de minimis pollutant discharge to waters of the State. Some BMP's are indicated below:

1. Drill pits or ponds of adequate size for total containment of all fluids containing drill cuttings, surfactants and associated chemicals.
2. Pits or ponds used for settling; followed by filter cloth and/or straw bales which can be used for filtration prior to fluids entering surface waters of the state.
3. Land application of produced waters during drilling, pump testing, and well development where no discharge would occur to waters of the State.
4. Land application where sufficient filtration through vegetation removes solids and turbidity before water is diffused and enters any surface waters.
5. Other sediment and turbidity reduction treatment such as frac tanks, cyclone separators, etc.

Pollution of waters of the state is a violation of the Water Quality Act, UCA 19-5, which provides for significant monetary penalties, and additional penalties for violations that are willful or caused by gross negligence.

If you have any concerns not covered in this fact sheet or any further questions, please contact:

Mike Herkimer
(801) 538-6058
Division of Water Quality
288 North 1460 West
P.O. Box 144870
Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-4870

Jim Goddard
(801) 538-7314
Division of Water Rights
1594 West North Temple, Suite 220
Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-6300