

Press Release

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EHP Responds to Marcellus Shale Coalition Letter, Finds False Arguments and Errors of Fact in Discussion of Public Health Matters

McMURRAY, PA, November 5, 2019 – The Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project (EHP) sent a letter today to Patrick O’Neill, Chairman of the Air Quality Technical Advisory Committee (AQTAC) of the PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), responding to a letter David Spigelmyer of the Marcellus Shale Coalition (MSC) sent to Chairman O’Neill regarding the health impacts of shale gas development. EHP found fault with the Spigelmyer letter on eight counts, including false arguments, misleading statements, omissions, and factual errors.

“If the shale gas industry were truly concerned about the health of residents, its spokespersons would not be criticizing every study that came out, trying to sow doubt with letters like Mr. Spigelmyer’s,” EHP’s Director Raina Rippel wrote in the EHP letter. “Rather than acting like a guilty party trying to cover its tracks, a responsible industry would work with the DEP, the DOH, and other researchers to improve shale gas practices and subsequently reduce health risks and negative health outcomes.”

EHP urged Chairman O’Neill and AQTAC to include measures to reduce shale gas leaks, ensure adequate setbacks of facilities from homes and schools, and prevent harmful pollutants from reaching the air, water, and soil, thereby protecting the health of hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians. “Public precaution must always overrule corporate protectionism,” wrote Rippel.

Background

On October 17, 2019, the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) made a presentation to AQTAC regarding the health risks of shale gas development. The presentation was titled “[Oil and Gas Production \(ONGP\) health concerns and the ONGP reports.](#)”

On October 21, 2019, David Spigelmyer sent a letter to AQTAC Chairman Patrick O’Neill attempting to refute a number of points the DOH made in its presentation.

Soon thereafter, the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project (EHP) became aware of the letter, and on November 5, 2019, EHP sent a letter to Chairman O’Neill with eight counterpoints to the Spigelmyer letter.

To see both EHP’s letter and the Spigelmyer letter, click [here](#).

The Eight Counterpoints

In brief, here are EHP's eight points of contention with the Spigelmyer letter. See [the EHP letter](#) for expanded explanations.

1. Mr. Spigelmyer argues that, when it comes to fracking and health effects, anything short of a proven causation is negligible and should be disregarded. This is a naïve and dangerous assertion.
2. Mr. Spigelmyer cites "shortcomings, biases and incomplete conclusions" as reasons why studies showing a correlation between shale gas development and negative health outcomes should be disregarded. In reality, all research studies have unavoidable biases and limitations, and those are always stated clearly within the context of the conclusions made.
3. Mr. Spigelmyer cites the DOH's evaluation of existing literature as reason that existing epidemiological studies should be ignored. Meanwhile, EHP has fully refuted this evaluation in [an open letter to the DOH](#).
4. Mr. Spigelmyer cites a study of the Fort Cherry School District commissioned by Range Resources (the Gradient Report) as proof that there is no connection between fracking and health risks. In [a public statement](#) earlier this year, EHP concluded that the Gradient Report is flawed in its methodology, scope, and lack of objectivity.
5. In trying to write off negative birth outcomes that have been linked to shale gas development, Mr. Spigelmyer states that a study out of the University of Pittsburgh, which concluded that mothers most exposed to shale gas activities delivered children with lower birth weights, and which the DOH cited in its presentation, "was not peer reviewed." This is false, as the study was indeed peer reviewed.
6. While Mr. Spigelmyer correctly asserts that the quantity of VOC emissions is down in the region since 1995, and sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions are down since 1990, what he neglects to say is that emissions of these toxic pollutants are once again beginning to rise and that southwestern Pennsylvania continues to lag the nation in air quality.
7. Mr. Spigelmyer erroneously states that "the hospitalization rate for the five shale-producing counties were all less than 10 per 10,000 residents, while the average for the non-shale producing counties examined were all in excess of 112 per 10,000 residents." The fact is that the hospitalization rate in non-shale producing counties was 11.2 per 10,000 residents (not 112). While this may have been simply a typo, it's nevertheless conveniently misleading. EHP also objects to Mr. Spigelmyer's use of DOH's 2015 Asthma Focus Report, which doesn't intend to look at asthma rates in relation to shale gas development.
8. Mr. Spigelmyer states that: "Unconventional wastewater has not been treated and discharged into waterways since 2011...." While this may be true, it's also true that the industry has sent approximately 800,000 tons per year of solid fracking waste to Pennsylvania landfills resulting in liquid leachate – which is high in radium, a radioactive metal – being sent on to sewage treatment plants, where it cannot be effectively treated and has therefore been discharged into rivers at rates higher than drinking water standards.

About Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project

The [Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project](#) (EHP) is a nonprofit public health organization that defends public health in the face of oil and gas development. We provide frontline communities with timely monitoring, interpretation and guidance. We engage diverse stakeholders: health professionals, researchers, community organizers, public servants, and others. We do so because knowledge protects health.