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PA Department of Health Visits Communities and Families Impacted by Shale Gas Development, Hears First-hand Accounts of Health Harms

August 5, 2021— On July 27, the **Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH)** visited communities and people impacted by shale gas development (fracking) in southwestern Pennsylvania, learning first-hand how the industry has harmed health and changed the lives of families forever. **Alison Beam** (Acting Secretary of Health for the DOH) took the tour, as did **Raphael (Ray) Barishansky** (Deputy Secretary of Health Preparedness and Community Protection), **Peter Blank** (Director of Policy), and **Barry Ciccocioppo** (Director of Communications).

Lois Bower-Bjornson, Southwestern Pennsylvania Field Organizer for the **Clean Air Council** and host of Frackland Tours, guided the tour. Accompanying the DOH on the tour were public health and community advocacy groups **Center for Coalfield Justice**, **Earthworks**, **Environmental Health Project**, **Mountain Watershed Association**, and **Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania**.

The tour was conducted by school bus, and during travel time the advocacy groups shared information and research data with DOH officials. Said Bower-Bjornson, “It has been a journey and a duty to bring voices to those who don’t have one, so that their stories can be heard by those that need to hear them.”

Part of the tour included visits and discussions with impacted residents, including **Janice Blanock**, a Cecil, PA, resident who lost her son, Luke, to Ewing sarcoma, a rare bone cancer, when he was just 19. “I would like to thank the PA DOH for taking the time to attend our tour,” said Blanock. “It would be difficult to imagine, after seeing what they saw and hearing the pleas for help from so many residents whose lives have been so negatively impacted by the oil and gas industry, that they could not take action of some kind.”

During the tour, **Melissa Ostroff**, Pennsylvania Field Advocate for Earthworks, showed visual evidence of heavy pollution from compressor stations using an industry-standard optical gas imaging camera. “Top Department of Health officials have seen the toxic oil and gas air pollution Pennsylvania communities have been breathing for years,” said Ostroff. “We hope that these public health leaders are more enlightened, ready to prioritize health above polluters, and better understand the need for the Wolf Administration to stop further oil and gas expansion in Pennsylvania.”

The tour included visits to shale gas well pads, super well pads, in-ground and above-ground impoundments, and compressor stations. “In November 2019, families who lost children to cancer demanded Governor Wolf investigate the health impacts of the unconventional gas development industry,” said **Tammy Murphy**, Advocacy Director of Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania. “It is the DOH’s responsibility to use the governor’s promise to the families to determine if the industry’s radioactive waste streams are a threat to public health, so that residents and workers can know if it is not currently safe to live and work in their respective environments.”

The advocacy groups urged the DOH to continue to engage with communities and individuals impacted by oil and gas development, working with residents to protect themselves from exposure to emissions that put public health at risk.

“With more than two dozen epidemiological studies already showing a correlation between shale gas development and public health harms, and more coming out all the time, we must turn our attention to breaking the chain of exposure that threatens residents in these communities,” said **Alison L. Steele**, Executive Director of the Environmental Health Project. “Given its high visibility and position of authority, the DOH should be front and center in that endeavor.”

The groups had previously urged the DOH to interact more directly with communities to educate themselves on the risks people living in proximity to shale gas development experience every day.

“It is always surreal for me, as an impacted resident, to watch others experience the grief of some of our neighbors whose lives have been uprooted by the oil and gas industry,” said **Heaven Sensky**, Community Organizer for Center for Coalfield Justice. “It is uncomfortable to put ourselves up for display, and sometimes I even forget how vastly different our lives are compared to those who hold the power to make decisions about our safety. I want to thank the DOH for being respectful witnesses to our suffering. I am hoping with everything that I am that they will carry with them what they have seen here and that they will do something about it.”

“While we appreciate the time that the DOH took to witness the impact of the shale gas industry in Washington County, the Secretary, her team, and the general public must understand the properties and people that were visited are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to devastating shale gas impacts in Southwestern Pennsylvania,” said **Stacey Magda**, Community Organizer, Mountain Watershed Association. “We encourage the DOH to work more closely with our groups to be connected to the communities in which our organizations have long been invested to fully understand the scope of this crisis.”

Dr. Edward (Ned) Ketyer—a pediatrician, board member of Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania, and consultant to the Environmental Health Project—offered the DOH a growing body of evidence that shale gas development is creating a public health crisis that can no longer be ignored. “After more than a decade of suffering health damage from drilling and fracking activities, will Pennsylvanians finally have the public health champion they desperately need in Harrisburg?” asked Dr. Ketyer. “DOH Secretary Alison Beam and her team’s visit couldn’t have come at a more important time, as the evidence mounts that fracking chemicals, pollution, and radioactive waste are making residents living near gas operations in Pennsylvania sick. I am grateful that they took the time to come out to Washington County and see for themselves what is happening here and to listen to the stories of residents and their families who have been harmed.”

The DOH and the advocacy groups have pledged to meet again to discuss the tour and its implications for protecting public health in the face of oil and gas development.

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