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## **Health Advocacy Groups Question Pennsylvania Department of Health on Shale Gas Development Studies**

**December 10, 2020** — Public health advocacy groups **Physicians for Social Responsibility-Pennsylvania** (PSR-PA) and the **SWPA Environmental Health Project** (EHP) met on December 9 with the **Pennsylvania Department of Health** (DOH) to discuss ongoing questions surrounding [two studies](#) the DOH commissioned last year to examine the health effects of shale gas development – one a study of whether there is a correlation between the shale gas industry and the risk of [rare childhood cancers in southwestern Pennsylvania](#), and one a study of other potential health impacts from the shale gas industry. The DOH has partnered with an as-yet unannounced academic institution to perform the studies, which could take up to three years or more to complete.

**Dr. Ned Ketyer**, a pediatrician, board member of PSR-PA, and consultant to EHP, also attended the meeting. “Well-designed studies show higher odds of health outcomes like asthma exacerbations, high-risk pregnancies, and congenital heart defects in areas of shale gas development when compared to areas without it,” said Dr. Ketyer. “And then there’s cancer. More than 50 pollutants present in shale gas development – including formaldehyde, benzene, and radium – are known human carcinogens. And right now, in southwestern Pennsylvania, we are seeing worrisome spikes of rare childhood cancers.”

In the meeting, the public health advocates questioned the DOH on whether radioactive waste streams would be examined as one pathway to exposure affecting residents. The DOH replied that they are in the process of executing the purchase order with their academic partner and need to assess whether they can make amendments to the original

agreement to address some of the communities' concerns. This was the same answer that was given to the groups by the DOH back in June.

“The residents of our communities are experts in their own experiences,” said **Heaven Sensky**, Community Organizer for Center for Coalfield Justice. “They know that well head operations are only a small piece of the infrastructure of potential harm. This is why so many of them have sent [letters to the DOH](#), pleading with them to include waste streams of oil and gas operations in the investigation.”

When questioned about how the DOH planned to keep residents informed on the progress of the studies, as well as measures they could take to protect their health and the health of their families, the DOH said their purchase order included some requirements around doing public information, communication, and status updates to the communities during the three-year period of the studies. The DOH was not forthcoming on details of that plan.

“The DOH has shown leadership in other public health issues, which creates a stark contrast to see the rapid response and clear communication on those fronts while the community here still waits for answers. Despite a year of the same requests from our groups, the DOH still has no clear response for us on radioactivity, no plan for communication, and no plan for testing and protections for those worried about active exposure,” said **Laura Dagley**, Medical Advocacy Coordinator for PSR-PA and a registered nurse. “As a nurse, I can’t emphasize enough the importance of preventative health measures so three years down the road we aren’t seeing more cancer or deaths that could’ve been stopped.”

In January 2020, the health advocacy organizations urged the DOH to establish an [Investigations Process Overview Panel](#) for stakeholders that would ensure transparency throughout the entire process of the investigations from the design phase to the peer-review phase, eliminate conflicts of interest, and involve the participation of affected residents among other stakeholders. The DOH rejected that plan and has chosen not to include radioactive waste streams as an exposure pathway in the scope of the studies, despite the demands of the impacted residents.

When pressed, the DOH was reluctant to make any statements about the radioactive nature of fracking waste from the Marcellus Shale. The DOH was also hesitant to make any commitments regarding modifications of the existing studies or the addition of radioactivity studies in the future, stating that “this three-million-dollar study is a unique opportunity. We don’t traditionally have opportunities to do partnerships like this.... We would need to work outside the department and identify a federal funding source or work with individuals in the governor’s office to find funding to do a study beyond the funded study that we’re doing here.”

“The Department of Health chose the scope of the studies, which will merely measure old medical records without letting families know if their air, water, and soil are currently contaminated,” commented **Tammy Murphy**, Advocacy Director of PSR-PA. “Pennsylvanians are left unprotected while the responsibility of the unconventional gas

development industry and the government are shrouded and unchanged by the cancer crisis and other negative health consequences evidenced all across the state. This neglect occurs in spite of the recent [Grand Jury recommendations](#) and the long-standing environmental rights in [Article 1, Section 27 of the Pennsylvania State Constitution](#).”

The Center for Coalfield Justice, Physicians for Social Responsibility-Pennsylvania, and the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project are committed to continuing to engage with the DOH in hopes that the agency will hear the concerns of the community.

“As [dozens of epidemiological studies](#) have shown, people living close to shale gas development are being exposed to harmful emissions every day,” said EHP Executive Director **Alison L. Steele**. “To allow the continued risk of health consequences while the studies are ongoing, without any assistance from the Commonwealth, would be unconscionable. Just as with the COVID-19 pandemic, we expect the DOH to take proactive measures and provide information to help people better protect themselves and their families from harm.”

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