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Health Advocacy Groups Press PA Department on Monitoring and Testing of Shale Gas Development Emissions, Including Radioactive Waste Streams; Urge More Physician and Community Interaction

June 7, 2021— On June 1, public health advocacy groups **Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania** (PSR PA) and the **SWPA Environmental Health Project** (EHP) met for a fourth time with the **Pennsylvania Department of Health** (DOH) to press the agency to consider more monitoring of radioactive waste streams and other shale gas development emissions, while testing residents for exposures to toxic compounds from these sources. The groups also urged the DOH to interact more directly with physicians and communities to educate them on the risks of living in proximity to shale gas development.

The public health advocates also questioned the DOH on two health studies the state is sponsoring—one to determine whether there is a correlation between the shale gas industry and the risk of [rare childhood cancers in southwestern Pennsylvania](#), and another to study potential [health impacts](#) from the shale gas industry. The University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health will undertake the studies, which were originally planned to take up to three years to complete. Unless the university makes changes, these retrospective studies will examine a cohort of residents, with and without a record of illness, who self-identify their proximity to shale gas development sites to examine the historic correlation between illness and proximity.

“In November 2019, families who lost children to cancer [demanded Governor Wolf investigate](#) what is going on with their families because it is not OK. Gov. Wolf promised two three-year studies totaling \$3.9M, which has now been reduced to \$2.6M, with the studies to be conducted in less than 18 months, which still does not address immediate health concerns. The DOH—which crafted the scope of the studies, chose the academic

partner, and requested the amount of funding—now claims that the \$1.4M difference is not there and recommends that we turn to the legislature to request the full amount Gov. Wolf promised. As designed, the retrospective academic studies continue to ignore radioactive waste streams, fall short of the DOH's mission of the *prevention* of injury and disease, and fail to help residents and workers know whether or not it is currently safe to live and work in their respective environments. The full amount of money to address these concerns was already promised and should be allocated immediately,” said **Tammy Murphy**, Advocacy Director of Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania, who attended the meeting.

Despite the financial inconsistencies, the DOH seemed receptive to the ongoing request for a visit to Southwestern Pennsylvania. **Heaven Sensky**, Community Organizer for Center for Coalfield Justice, said, “It is absolutely imperative that representatives from the Department of Health, who are making decisions and drawing conclusions about our exposure to harmful fossil fuel extraction, come to our communities and witness themselves what we are facing. One cannot begin to understand the proximity and density of families whose homes and lives have been invaded by the fossil fuel industry without taking the time to witness it. We welcome the Department of Health to our community, and we hope that their experience here will better inform them moving forward with the study.”

As the DOH had requested after their last meeting, EHP provided the DOH with samples of community education materials. “The Department of Health has said that it does not have the bandwidth or resources to create community support materials related to health-protective guidance near unconventional oil and gas development,” said EHP Executive Director **Alison L. Steele**. “However, Secretary Beam indicated that the DOH would be open to sharing information from organizations such as EHP, which are more focused and knowledgeable on the topic than they are, as long as the materials do not endorse a position counter to that of the DOH. Since EHP's mission is to defend public health, and all of our materials are fact-based, the DOH should have no concerns about making existing resources widely available, thereby protecting the health of concerned Pennsylvania residents who have repeatedly asked for help.”

In the meeting, the public health advocates further pressed the DOH on whether the studies would examine radioactive waste streams as one pathway to exposure affecting residents, noting that other credible investigators have done so at relatively low cost.

“I believe the DOH recognizes there has been a loss of trust with communities due to their previous responses, or lack of response, to this issue. I look forward to seeing them work to repair this trust by engaging with communities, responding to their concerns, and fulfilling our request for further testing,” said **Laura Dagley**, Medical Advocacy Coordinator for PSR PA and a registered nurse.

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.

“Pennsylvanians living throughout the Marcellus Shale region remain very concerned about contamination of their air and water from toxic and radioactive fracking waste, and the impact fracking pollution has on their health and the health of their children. Now more than ever, we need DOH to protect public health and listen to residents facing serious health harms from this industry,” said **Dr. Ned Ketyer**, a pediatrician, board member of PSR PA, and consultant to EHP.

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