

The Activist Reading List

Oil and gas opponents routinely ignore credible research in favor of dubious studies and reports that support their ideological views. It's a strategy aimed at misleading the public.

BY SIMON LOMAX

The environmental activists who oppose domestic oil and natural gas production have a habit of telling reporters and elected officials that their anti-industry beliefs are based on “research.” Apparently, the activists want people to believe they sought out the most credible sources and objectively weighed the evidence before making a sober and measured decision that Colorado’s oil and gas industry—and the tens of thousands of jobs that depend on it—must be eliminated overnight.

But in reality, the activist reading list is short and highly selective. For example, the activists always overlook the 2009 Department of Energy and Ground Water Protection Council study that says hydraulic fracturing—a technology used for more than six decades to increase the productivity of oil and gas wells—is “safe and effective,” and finds the oil and gas industry is “regulated under a complex set of federal, state, and local laws that address every aspect of exploration and operation.” Likewise, they never seem to include a report from Colorado water and energy regulators which says hydraulic fracturing accounts for just one-tenth of one percent of the state’s total water use, or a study from Harvard University that says “[t]he increased role of shale gas in the U.S. energy sector could result in reduced water consumption.”

The activist reading list also conveniently leaves out another DOE-GWPC study, and similar reports from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency during the Clinton and Bush administrations, which determined the process of hydraulic fracturing process does not endanger drinking water. And the U.S. Geological Survey’s sampling of water wells in Louisiana’s Fayetteville Shale, which also found “no

groundwater contamination associated with gas production,” is still another report the activists are happy to leave on the shelf.

The same goes for a Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment report on air quality in Erie, Colo. The Washington, D.C. activist group Food & Water Watch declared Erie “ground zero of the national movement” against hydraulic fracturing last summer when a well pad was drilled more than 1,600 feet—roughly the length of five football fields—from an elementary school. But the CDPHE tested the air for pollution during drilling and hydraulic fracturing and the results were “well within acceptable limits to protect public health.” In fact, the CDPHE went further and concluded: “No significant concentrations were recorded that could be directly attributed to well completion operations at this well pad.” Strangely enough, the CDPHE report hasn’t made the activist reading list, nor have the three studies commissioned by the Town of Erie that analyzed local emissions data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and concluded the people of Erie are safe.

The anti-fracking activists never seem to include a report from Colorado water and energy regulators which says hydraulic fracturing accounts for just one-tenth of one percent of the state’s total water use.



(L-R) Actor Mark Ruffalo, , professor of engineering at Cornell University, Dr. Anthony Ingraffea, Sean Lennon, Yoko Ono, and director Josh Fox pose for a picture at the Artists Against Fracking Coalition Event at Paley Center For Media on August 29, 2012 in New York City.

Meanwhile, in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas—where the nation’s surge in natural gas development got started more than a decade ago—air quality regulators have recorded falling smog levels amid rising energy production, and concluded “when they are properly managed and maintained, oil and gas operations do not cause harmful excess air emissions.” So did the conclusions of these air quality professionals make the activist reading list? Forget about it.

Instead, the activists only seem interested in reading and promoting research that supports their ideological views and can be used to scare the public. Sometimes, that research simply uses a flawed methodology due to a poor understanding of how oil and gas is actually produced. In other cases, the authors also happen to be anti-industry activists with an axe to grind. Here are some of the worst examples of flawed or biased research cited by anti-industry activists in Colorado.

GARFIELD COUNTY ‘CANCER RISK’ PAPER

Water Defense, the New York activist group co-founded by Hollywood actor Mark Ruffalo, says a 2012 paper from the

Colorado School of Public Health found people living near a gas well are “more likely to develop cancer.” To start with, the CSPH study found no actual evidence of real health impacts; it was a modeling exercise that tried to predict future health impacts. Even so, the cancer risk it found—10 in one million—is actually lower than the background level of risk for every American, according to data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

But even to reach that level, the CSPH paper relied on a deeply flawed methodology that inflated the emissions from drilling and completing a natural gas well. Among their many mistakes, the authors assumed it takes years rather than months to develop a well pad, an error which exaggerated emissions by as much 900 percent. The authors also took their baseline air quality samples four miles upwind from Interstate 70, when the wells in question were just a mile from I-70. This mistake ensured the tailpipe emissions from thousands of cars and trucks were wrongly blamed on natural gas wells, which exaggerated their emissions even further. In fact, more than a year before it was published, the paper’s methodology was criticized by CDPHE experts, and it was later disavowed by local health officials. “They were not

sanctioned by the county, or paid by the county to do this paper,” Garfield County’s chief environmental health official, Jim Rada, said after its release.

AN ‘EXPLORATORY STUDY’ ON AIR QUALITY

In late 2012, a Paonia-based group called The Endocrine Disruption Exchange, or TEDX, released another paper on air quality in Garfield County which claimed to have found evidence of “human and environmental health impacts” that should be “examined further given that the natural gas industry is now operating in close proximity to human residences and public lands.” Throughout the paper, the authors insinuate that natural gas wells are responsible for what they found in their air quality samples. But then they make this admission: “The chemicals reported in this exploratory study cannot, however, be causally connected to natural gas operations.”

At no stage do the authors attempt to explain how they could write a paper about natural gas operations, air quality, and human health without producing any evidence to connect natural gas operations, air quality and human health. But some basic research on TEDX and its leader, Theo Colborn, it’s clear that an ideological connection was made long before this “research” project began.

To start with, the TEDX website openly declares its bias against oil and gas, claiming the industry is “steamrolling over vast segments of land in the West” and spreading “a cancer-like network of dirt roads over vast acreage.” Such a bias is hardly surprising, since TEDX has accepted at least \$425,000 from the New York Community Trust, which opposes oil and gas development and funds anti-industry activism. One of the report’s co-authors, Kim Schultz, even serves on the board of directors of a group that actively campaigns against oil and gas development.

As for Colborn, she’s a former employee of the World Wildlife Fund, and one of the stars of Josh Fox’s anti-industry film *Gasland*. Colborn has also admitted one of her primary goals is generating negative headlines on oil and gas development. At an activist event last year, she said “we need to get drilling and all the other sources of the pollution into the headlines” and “we’ve got to work on the media on this.” That’s hardly the kind of talk you expect to hear someone who claims to be an objective, independent scientist.

CORNELL’S ‘GAS WORSE THAN COAL’ PAPER

Since 2011, two Cornell University professors—Anthony Ingraffea and Robert Howarth—have attracted a lot of media attention by disputing the fact that natural gas produces roughly half the carbon emissions of coal when used to generate electricity. In fact, they actually claim natural gas produced with the help of hydraulic fracturing is worse for the climate than coal.

But this argument has been widely discredited by many authoritative sources, including other Cornell researchers, the U.S. Department of Energy, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Maryland, and research commissioned by the European Union. Most recently, a study from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Ingraffea and Howarth’s work was “incorrect” and “unreasonable,” and the EPA’s latest greenhouse gas data shows emissions from natural gas systems are falling, not rising as Ingraffea and Howarth suggest.

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Far from being independent scientists, it turns out Ingraffea and Howarth are anti-industry activists. For example, both men have endorsed a “pledge of resistance” against hydraulic fracturing in Colorado which calls for “non-violent acts of protest” directed at Governor John Hickenlooper and state lawmakers. Ingraffea has called oil and gas development “a devilish, deadly process,” and even helped launch Yoko Ono’s activist group, Artists Against Fracking, in New York last year.

This all makes perfect sense when you consider Ingraffea and Howarth’s so-called research was funded by the Park Foundation, an Ithaca, New York-based group that wants to ban hydraulic fracturing and provides millions of dollars to anti-industry activists, including Food & Water Watch and *Gasland* director Josh Fox.

As the oil and gas debate continues, you can expect the activists to keep talking a lot about research. But history shows the only “research” they’ll support is the kind that supports their existing worldview. ■

About the Author



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