

Fracking Study Sees Public Health Risks

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A new study out of Colorado is raising more questions about the chemicals used in the gas drilling process called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. The study, which has been accepted for publication in the International Journal of Human and Ecological Risk Assessment, was co-authored by Dr. Theo Colborn, head of the Endocrine Disruption Exchange (TDEX) in Paonia, Colorado and a frequent fracking critic.

The study, “Natural Gas Operations from a Public Health Perspective” calls for the full disclosure of all chemicals used in fracking and better regulation of the industry.

Hydraulic fracturing involves injecting water, sand, and a cocktail of chemicals at high pressure into rock formations thousands of feet below the surface. The chemicals that make up that fracking fluid are cause for concern. They may include, among other things, barium, strontium, benzene, glycol-ethers, toluene, 2-(2-methoxyethoxy) ethanol, and nonylphenols. Fracking is a suspected culprit in many instances of water contamination in Pennsylvania, Wyoming, Colorado and elsewhere.

Thanks to the 2005 Energy Act, hydraulic fracturing is exempt from regulation under the Safe Drinking Water Act. As a result, drillers are not required to disclose the chemicals that make up fracking fluids.

For this latest study, Dr. Colborn and co-authors compiled a list of products and chemicals used in natural gas operations, searched the literature for their health effects, and categorized them according to standard toxicological categories. From this they created a profile of possible health effects based on the number of chemicals associated with each category.

According to the study synopsis, the researchers demonstrated that toxic chemicals are used during both the fracturing and drilling phases of gas operations. The study also showed that there may be long-term health effects that are not immediately recognized, and that waste evaporation pits may contain numerous chemicals on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Superfund list.

The authors continued: *“Our findings show the difficulty of developing a water quality monitoring program. To protect public health we recommend full disclosure of the contents of all products, extensive air and water monitoring, a comprehensive human health study, and regulation of hydraulic fracturing under the Safe Drinking Water Act.”*

Recently, momentum has been building to better regulate fracking. Just this past March, the EPA announced it would be conducting a study on the impacts of hydraulic fracturing that many hope will lead to better oversight of the industry. And starting this month, industry-friendly Wyoming will require drillers to publicly disclose the ingredients in their fracking fluids. Finally, the so-called FRAC Act, which is currently being considered in the US Congress, would eliminate the exemption to the Safe Drinking Water Act.