

DOE's Natural Gas Subcommittee Releases Draft 90-day Report

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A draft of the Department of Energy (DOE) Natural Gas Subcommittee's report of its 90-day findings was issued on August 11, 2011. The [draft 90-day report](#) presents recommendations to reduce environmental impacts from shale gas production, which has rapidly developed in the United States in recent years. The Natural Gas Subcommittee of the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board (SEAB) was created in January 2011 to evaluate the role of natural gas in a future clean energy economy. President Obama's [Blueprint for a Secure Energy Future](#), issued on March 30, 2011, required the Subcommittee to "identify, within 90 days, any immediate steps that can be taken to improve the safety and environmental performance of fracking." Environmental advocacy groups have complained about the industry ties of many Subcommittee members. Conversely, Republican politicians and the oil and gas industry have criticized the DOE for not including sufficient oil and gas industry representatives on the Subcommittee.

The draft 90-day report identifies four areas of environmental concern over the development of shale gas: 1) the pollution of drinking water supplies from chemicals used in fracking fluids; 2) air pollution; 3) community disruption; and 4) cumulative adverse impacts on communities and ecosystems. In identifying these areas of concern, the Subcommittee considered all steps of the shale gas production process, including perforation, water and fracturing fluid preparation, fracking, the collection and handling of flow-back and produced water, gas collection, processing and pipeline transmission, and site remediation.

The Subcommittee recommends:

- Making shale gas information available to the public;
- Improving communication among state and federal regulators by providing funding to the State Review of Oil and Natural Gas Environmental Regulation (STRONGER) and the Ground Water Protection Council's project to extend and expand the Risk Based Data Management System;
- Improving air quality through emission standards for new and existing sources and the disclosure of air pollution emissions;
- Protecting water quality by companies adopting best practices in well development, and agency review and updating of rules and enforcement practices to protect drinking and surface waters;
- Disclosure of fracking fluid composition;

- Reduction in diesel fuel use;
- Managing short-term and cumulative impacts on communities, land use, wildlife and ecologies through various mechanisms;
- Creation of a shale gas industry production organization dedicated to continuous improvement of best practices; and
- Federal government support and funding for research and development.

Notably, the Subcommittee acknowledged that it did not conduct any cost-benefit analysis. Instead, it identified steps for reducing environmental and safety risks. The Subcommittee also did not make any recommendations about the proper regulatory roles for state and federal governments. However, it did emphasize that some form of regulations were necessary to protect the public.

Some environmental organizations have already criticized the Subcommittee's recommendations as not going far enough. However, it is important to note that the Subcommittee and the DOE will not be responsible for setting environmental regulations regarding fracking or shale gas production. EPA has clearly taken up this issue as a regulatory priority, as it is currently studying the impact of fracking on drinking water supplies and has proposed air regulations that would reduce emissions of pollutants from oil and gas operations.

SEAB will hold a public meeting via conference call to discuss the draft report on August 15, 2011.

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