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Peer-review panel for EPA fracking study includes six Pa. scientists

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Published: January 18, 2011

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A panel of geologists, toxicologists, engineers and doctors that will peer-review a high-profile Environmental Protection Agency study of hydraulic fracturing will include six scientists from Pennsylvania, more than any other state.

The panel will review the techniques and analysis the EPA uses to draft a study of the potential environmental and health impacts of hydraulic fracturing - the process used in natural gas exploration of injecting a high-pressure mix of chemically treated water and sand underground to break apart a rock formation and release the gas.

The panel might also be called on to review the conclusions of the study, which are slated for release in 2012.

The board, called the Hydraulic Fracturing Study Plan Review Panel, was narrowed to 23 members from a list of 88 nominated candidates, some of whom were criticized in public comments submitted by industry or environmental groups for being biased.

All but four members selected for the panel are affiliated with research universities and none is currently employed by an oil or gas company.

Five of seven members of a previous peer-review panel involved in a 2004 EPA study of hydraulic fracturing in coal-bed methane wells were current or former employees of the oil and gas industry. That study's findings, that hydraulic fracturing poses "little or no threat" to drinking water aquifers, has been touted by the industry but challenged by an EPA whistle-blower.

In a memo announcing the new panel, the EPA found "no conflicts of interest or appearances of a lack of impartiality for the members of this panel."

It will be led by David A. Dzombak, professor of environmental engineering at Carnegie Mellon University, and include Michel Boufadel of Temple University; Elizabeth Boyer of Penn State University; Richard Hammack, a Pittsburgh-based project manager for the U.S. Department of Energy; Jeanne VanBriesen of Carnegie Mellon and Radisav D. Vidic of the University of Pittsburgh.

Contact the writer: llegere@timeshamrock.com

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Anyone in their right mind has got to welcome a science and fact based evaluation of the process. The results may result in changes to the industry or a lowering of the shrill level of anti-drillers -- or both. Regardless, I'll be happier with more knowledge and information, regardless of what it says.

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