

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PROJECT

DEFENDING PUBLIC HEALTH 2012-2022

environmentalhealthproject.org

October 14, 2022

Denise A. Johnson, M.D., FACOG, FACHE
Acting Secretary of Health
625 Forster Street
8th Floor West/Health & Welfare Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

RE: Response to State Sen. Bartolotta's 9/21/22 Letter to the Department of Health

Dear Acting Secretary Johnson,

It has come to our attention that State Senator Camera Bartolotta (46th Senatorial District) sent you a letter on September 21, 2022, urging the Department of Health to pull out of a community meeting in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, held on October 5, which discussed the ongoing studies the University of Pittsburgh is conducting around shale gas development and public health. As you know, the university had called for this meeting back in April of this year, and people in your department had been instrumental in planning it until they pulled out a week before the event.

Today, I am writing to correct the record on several mischaracterizations concerning my organization, the Environmental Health Project (EHP), that Sen. Bartolotta put forth in her letter.

First, EHP does not try to prevent the shale gas industry from operating, as the senator seems to believe. In fact, EHP has never called for a ban or moratorium on the shale gas industry. We leave that work to other organizations. Instead, we advocate for public health protections in the face of an industry that is underregulated and that emits toxic chemicals into the environment at levels concerning to researchers and residents alike. In carrying out this advocacy work, we educate health professionals, policymakers, and the public on the elevated health risks for thousands of residents living in proximity to shale gas infrastructure.

EHP works with a variety of groups and partners on similar goals, even when we may share different positions on certain issues. The Department of Health is one such partner. In fact, EHP agreed to participate in the Canonsburg meeting precisely because of our reputation as a science-based organization that provides factual information to communities and does not engage in community organizing or lobbying. We reject any argument that says otherwise.

Secondly, Sen. Bartolotta writes that, “Several of the studies which the EHP has advanced in the past regarding fossil fuel development have lacked any scientific rigor, have been misleading in their conclusions, and can only be described as activist pieces under the guise of science.” This could not be further from the truth.

EHP advances only the best available science, which includes a rapidly growing body of evidence—now more than 30 peer-reviewed epidemiological studies—that shows correlations between shale gas development and public health harms. Epidemiological studies are the gold standard when it comes to studying the correlation between pollution and public health. If Sen. Bartolotta wishes to downplay the value of these studies at the expense of her constituents’ health, that is her prerogative. EHP, however, is tasked with examining the available science and advancing it for the creation of sound, health-protective policy.

Most troubling to us is that Sen. Bartolotta’s letter and the Department of Health’s subsequent decision to pull out of the meeting represent a trend of minimizing the concerns of residents who have legitimate worries about health impacts from shale gas development. If not for the persistence of long-suffering residents, these studies would not have even happened.

The contract between the Department of Health and the University of Pittsburgh clearly states:

From July 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022, the Provider shall: As requested by the Department, create presentations for other presenters or present data to relevant audiences as it pertains to project work. Neither party shall refuse any reasonable request to present data; two weeks’ notice will be considered adequate notice for either party.

The reporting section of the contract also states:

On at least an annual basis, the Principal Investigator(s) and study team shall present study progress to date in a public forum in conjunction with the Department.

Residents faced with health issues from living in the shadow of shale gas development deserve to be updated on the progress of the study, as described in the contract. Any suggestion that holding this promised meeting is biased is not only untrue but unfair to those who fought for these studies in the first place. By not showing up at this meeting, the Department of Health and the University of Pittsburgh have further eroded the trust of residents, aggravating a credibility gap that will be very difficult to resolve going forward.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond, and we look forward to future productive conversations with the Department of Health on scientific research and protecting the health of Pennsylvanians.

Respectfully,



Alison L. Steele
Executive Director

cc: Senator Jake Corman, President Pro Tempore
Senator Kim Ward, Majority Leader
Senator Gene Yaw, Environmental & Energy Resources Chair
Senator Michele Brooks, Health & Human Services Chair
Faith Haeussler, Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, PA Department of Health
Barry Ciccocioppo, Communications Director, PA Department of Health
Peter Blank, Executive Deputy Secretary, PA Department of Health
Dr. Wendy Braund, Deputy Secretary of Health Preparedness and Community Protection
Dr. Sharon Watkins, Bureau of Epidemiology and State Epidemiologist

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Senate of Pennsylvania

September 21, 2022

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senatorbartolotta.com

Denise A. Johnson, M.D., FACOG, FACHE
Acting Secretary of Health
625 Forster Street
8th Floor West/Health & Welfare Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Acting Secretary Johnson,

I am writing to request additional details from the Department of Health regarding an upcoming event scheduled to be held in my Senatorial District. My office has reached out to the Department approximately five times requesting a call or meeting but due to a lack of response I am now writing this letter.

As you recall, in December 2020 the Department of Health entered a two-year, \$2.6 million contract with the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health to conduct several studies related to the potential health impacts in southwestern Pennsylvania associated with unconventional natural gas development. Under the terms of the contract, these studies are to be completed and released later this year. As part of these contracts, the University of Pittsburgh is required to participate with the Department in a public forum, at least annually, to engage and advise members of the public on the status and progress of the contracted work. To my knowledge, no public forum was conducted last year.

I recently learned, via a news article, that the Department has apparently scheduled the public forum with the University of Pittsburgh for Wednesday, October 5th at 5:30 PM in Canonsburg. However, I am very concerned that it appears this forum is being spearheaded by the Center for Coalfield Justice (CCJ). The CCJ is advertising the forum on its website, is hosting the registration link for the event, and is signing up attendees who register to receive their future communications. It is also pre-screening questions submitted by the public to be posed at the forum to the Department and University of Pittsburgh participants.

Denise A. Johnson, M.D., FACOG, FACHE
Acting Secretary of Health
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It is well known that the CCJ is adamantly opposed to fossil fuel development and has worked to dissuade both policymakers and the public from supporting these industries and the jobs that depend upon them. In addition, the CCJ has arranged for the Environmental Health Project (EHP) to make a presentation to the assembled public regarding the EHP's own advocacy efforts to oppose natural gas development. Several of the studies which the EHP has advanced in the past regarding fossil fuel development have lacked any scientific rigor, have been misleading in their conclusions, and can only be described as activist pieces under the guise of science.

I am writing to inquire why the Department has chosen to align itself with anti-fossil fuel advocates as part of its outreach efforts on what is supposed to be an unbiased, fact-based scientific undertaking. Surely, the Department has the capacity to organize a public forum that meets the needs of community engagement in an unbiased manner. However, failing to do so calls into question the process being employed to conduct important public health studies and, ultimately, the legitimacy of their conclusions.

I await your prompt review and response to this important matter. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Camera Bartolotta
State Senator
46th Senatorial District

CB/kh/as

cc: Senator Jake Corman, President Pro Tempore
Senator Kim Ward, Majority Leader
Senator Gene Yaw, Environmental & Energy Resources Chair
Senator Michele Brooks, Health & Human Services Chair