

Press Release

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Contacts: Scott Smith, EHP, ssmith@environmentalhealthproject.org, 412-600-0738
Jill Kriesky, EHP, jkriesky@environmentalhealthproject.org, 724-260-5504

EHP Questions Comments Made By PA Secretary of Health Dr. Levine Regarding Whether the State Is Protecting the Public's Health in High-Fracking Areas

McMURRAY, PA, August 1, 2019 – The Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project (EHP) sent a letter today to Dr. Rachel Levine, Pennsylvania's Secretary of Health, questioning her public comments regarding whether the state is adequately protecting public health in the wake of the shale gas (fracking) expansion throughout Pennsylvania. EHP believes Dr. Levine and her Department of Health is understating the risk to public health and has relied on a flawed review to make its case.

Dr. Levine was quoted in a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article titled "[Gov. Wolf wants more data about how gas drilling impacts citizens' health](#)," (Hohey and Templeton, June 19, 2019) as saying: "As a pediatrician and a public health advocate, the public can rest assured that if I knew that we were inadequately protecting public health, I would make that case clear to Governor Wolf. But I believe that we do not have enough information to make such a determination in this case."

EHP expressed deep concern over this remark and over Dr. Levine's citation of a recent literature review of studies that assessed health impacts from the shale gas industry. Wrote EHP's Sarah Rankin and Beth Weinberger, the co-authors of the letter: "We have reviewed the study you [Dr. Levine] based this comment on, as well as many other studies, and we have performed our own research and heard from enough community members to determine that the Department of Health is indeed failing to protect the health of Pennsylvanians in the face of rampant shale gas development."

Assailing the Department of Health for its wait-and-see attitude, Rankin and Weinberger instead prescribe prevention as the best path forward for dealing with the health effects people experience in the shale gas region. The authors of the letter wrote: "With regards to shale gas development, the fact that you have made the determination that Pennsylvanians' health is adequately protected, based on one flawed review of 20 epidemiologic studies – many of which *have* found evidence of significant harmful health impacts – while ignoring the hundreds of other pertinent studies from other data streams that lay out the potential for harm is, in our opinion, negligent."

Rankin and Weinberger specifically cited the literature review of 20 studies conducted jointly by the Pennsylvania and Colorado Departments of Health, authored by Bamber, et al. (2019)¹. They noted that the weighting used in the review ignores best practices in environmental health research because it unduly penalizes observational studies. The authors of the letter said that the framework most fundamentally applied to the review was one designed not for environmental health studies but for health care decision-making, a field where randomized controlled trials are preferred. They wrote: “In environmental exposure scenarios, however, randomized controlled trials are not just difficult; they’re impossible.”

Rankin and Weinberger also called out another major flaw of the Bamber review, namely the failure to accept evidence from research not done on humans, including animal studies and risk assessments. They further cited another recent literature review of the same group of studies, which concluded that what has been reported to date offers no reassurance that shale gas development is likely to be safe for public health.² “While you [Dr. Levine] wait, health risks and outcomes related to shale gas drilling within your state and others have been well-documented by credible researchers,” Rankin and Weinberger wrote.

Rankin and Weinberger concluded their letter by saying: “To fully understand the weight of this problem, you must understand not only the epidemiologic literature, but the toxicology, animal, and risk studies, as well as the regulatory loopholes the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has afforded the gas industry. If you still feel that the Department of Health is adequately protecting Pennsylvanians from the health impacts of shale gas development, we ask you to specifically outline how much more evidence of the contrary you need before you make the case to Governor Wolf that now is the time to act.”

To read the full text of the letter go to:

<https://www.environmentalhealthproject.org/sites/default/files/assets/press/open-letter-to-dr.-rachel-levine.pdf>

About the Authors of the Letter

Sarah Rankin, MPH, BSN, OCN – Public Health Nurse – received a BA from Penn State University before completing her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of Pittsburgh. She worked as an oncology nurse and nurse manager at UPMC Shadyside and Hillman Cancer Center for nine years before completing her Master’s in Public Health through the University of Florida. Concentrating on epidemiology and environmental health during her graduate studies, Sarah completed an internship with EHP during the spring of 2018.

Beth Weinberger, MPH, PhD – Research and Communications Specialist – received her Masters in Public Health from the University of Michigan and a PhD in Political Science from Yale University. She began her career in direct service maternal-child health but has since focused primarily on research and consulting. Ms. Weinberger was a research associate at Yale University’s Institution for Social & Policy Studies where her research focused on civic engagement.

About Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project

The [Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project](#) (EHP) is a nonprofit public health organization that defends public health in the face of oil and gas development. We provide frontline communities with timely monitoring, interpretation and guidance. We engage diverse stakeholders: health professionals, researchers, community organizers, public servants, and others. We do so because knowledge protects health.

¹ “A Systematic Review of the Epidemiologic Literature Assessing Health Outcomes in Populations Living near Oil and Natural Gas Operations: Study Quality and Future Recommendations.” Bamber, A.M., et al. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2019.

² Gorski, I. and Schwartz, B.S. (2019). Environmental health concerns from unconventional natural gas development. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Global Public Health*. doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190632366.013.44