DRILLING FOR COMMON GROUND: HOW PUBLIC OPINION TRACKS EXPERTS IN THE DEBATE OVER FEDERAL REGULATION OF SHALE OIL & GAS EXTRACTION

Elizabeth Ann Glass Geltman
CUNY School of Public Health

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Public interest in environmental and health impacts from shale oil and gas extraction (what the public calls “fracking”) is growing. Industry claims the public outcry against the new technology is not grounded in science. In February 2013, Resources for the Future (“RFF”) published a list of high priority “risk pathways” that experts from NGOs, academia, government, and industry all agreed were real concerns about fracking. This article used the risk matrix to evaluate whether public comments in dockets of federal agencies that proposed regulation concerning hydraulic fracturing tracked expert concern. The article found that the public tracked many of the experts’ shared concerns. The highest concern was water pollution in surface and groundwater from fracking fluids (or, “frac fluids”), flowback, and produced water. The public shared expert worry over cementing and casing failures and understood that these were the primary causes of most groundwater contamination. Damage to habitat was the third greatest concern raised by the public. Methane leakage into air and water was less cited. Concerns over technical matters were rarely mentioned by the general public but were often cited by self-identified experts. The article concludes that while the general public did not go into the detail about the regulatory mechanism that was often reflected by experts, the concerns raised by the public in comments to proposed rulemakings largely reflected the consensus themes of the experts. More significantly, the public writing overwhelmingly favored increased federal regulation to protect public health and the environment. The very limited number of comments opposing increased regulation were presented by members of industry; these objections were based on financial considerations and did not present evidence that adequate

* Elizabeth Ann Glass Geltman, JD, LLM, is an associate professor at the City University of New York (“CUNY”) Graduate School of Public Health & Health Policy. She is the author of 17 books on environmental and natural resource policy. This study was funded by generous grants from Professional Staff Congress-City University of New York ("PSC-CUNY") and the Hunter College Undergraduate Research Initiative. Additional in-kind & training support was provided by the Temple University Center for Health Law, Policy & Practice and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Policy Surveillance Program. The author would like to thank her team of research assistants at Hunter College: Sarah Louis Kuril, Emily Austerberry, Mustafa Ali, Emilio Cintron, Adam Hess, Hailu Tedia, Henry Akinleye, Gunwant Gill and Miriam Jovanovic.
regulations were already in place to protect public health and the environment.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE SHALE GAS CONTROVERSY

Relatively recent changes in technology that allow the industry to extract oil and natural gas from shale is transforming domestic and international energy markets and the United States landscape.¹ The combination of high volume hydraulic fracturing (“HVHF,” or

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“fracking”)² with horizontal drilling³ is changing the way the people in the United States think about extraction.⁴ The United States has now transformed from an oil and natural gas importer to a major natural gas exporter.⁵ The United States is now also exporting the technology to extract energy resources from shale in addition to exporting fossil fuels.⁶ In short, natural gas trapped in rocks that was once considered “nuisance gas” is now a significant energy source poised to fuel the near, if not long-term, future.⁷

More available energy resources increases energy development, yet citizens in the United States do not agree on either the benefits or the risks associated with extracting oil and gas from shale. Some private landowners sitting above shale mineral rights are goaded by oil and gas developers and choose to engage in a gold rush-style frenzy. Some subsistence farmers and poor rural dwellers sitting above energy rich shale watch the price of previously low-value land skyrocket. Other landowners watch neighbors uncover incredible riches, but sit frustrated on land without extractable shale; neighbors can bear the burdens of construction and development without being able to cash in on the profits. In many shale rich towns, neighbors compete with each other over appropriate land use, since shale energy development is often awkward or even incompatible with historical land use patterns. Oil and gas extraction from shale is a heavy industry involving extensive use of


machinery that can negatively impact activities\textsuperscript{13} and adjacent property uses like bed and breakfasts, luxury resorts, and camps.

Concerns about shale gas development are not, however, limited to NIMBYs\textsuperscript{14} and LULUs.\textsuperscript{15} The range of impacts from extraction activities that the environmental and public health community are concerned about include air,\textsuperscript{16} water,\textsuperscript{17} light,\textsuperscript{18} and noise pollution.\textsuperscript{19} Downstream disposal


\textsuperscript{16} See, e.g., Aviva Litovitz et al., Estimation of Regional Air-Quality Damages from Marcellus Shale Natural Gas Extraction in Pennsylvania, 8 ENVTL. RES. LETTERS 014017 (2013) (“Most emissions are related to ongoing activities, i.e., gas production and compression, which can be expected to persist beyond initial development and which are largely unrelated to the unconventional nature of the resource. Regulatory agencies and the shale gas industry, in developing regulations and best practices, should consider air emissions from these long-term activities, especially if development occurs in more populated areas of the state where per-ton emissions damages are significantly higher.”).

\textsuperscript{17} See, e.g., R. D. Vidic et al., Impact of Shale Gas Development on Regional Water Quality, 340 SCIENCE 826 (2013) (“Horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing make the extraction of tightly bound natural gas from shale formations economically feasible. These technologies are not free from environmental risks, however, especially those related to regional water quality, such as gas migration, contaminant transport through induced and natural fractures, wastewater discharge, and accidental spills.”).

\textsuperscript{18} See generally Steve Albers & Dan Duriscoe, Modeling Light Pollution from Population Data and Implications for National Park Service Land, 18 GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM 56 (2001) (describing a model to “evaluate the effects of light pollution on areas administered by the National Park Service (NPS) for the purpose of protecting night sky visibility.”).

\textsuperscript{19} See Jacob A. Benfield et al., Aesthetic and Affective Effects of Vocal and Traffic Noise on Natural Landscape Assessment, 30 J. ENVTL. PSYCHOL. 103 (2010); Jesse R Barber, Kevin R. Crooks & Kurt M. Fristrup, The Costs of Chronic Noise Exposure for Terrestrial Organisms, 25 TRENDS ECOLOGY & EVOLUTION 180 (2010) (“Growth in transportation networks, resource extraction, motorized recreation and urban development is responsible for chronic noise exposure
activities associated with mineral extraction from shale, including deep well injection of extraction wastes, have also raised concerns from both scientists and the public due to studies of increased seismic activity associated with mineral extraction from shale.20

The federal government documented numerous instances where private companies engaged in oil and gas extraction that contaminated federally owned land.21 For example, in a recent rulemaking proceeding, the National Park Service determined that pollution from shale oil and gas extraction in national parks includes instances of: surface water quality degradation from spills, storm water runoff, erosion, and sedimentation; soil and groundwater contamination from existing drilling mud pits, poorly constructed wells, spills, and leaks; air quality degradation (including “notable odors”) from dust, natural gas flaring, hydrogen sulfide gas, and emissions from production operations and vehicles; increased noise from seismic operations, blasting, construction, oil and gas drilling, and production operations; adverse effects on wildlife behavior, breeding, and habitat utilization; disruption of wildlife migration routes; adverse effects on sensitive and endangered species; view-shed intrusion by roads, traffic, drilling equipment, production equipment, and pipelines; night sky intrusion from artificial lighting and gas flares; disturbance to archeological and cultural resources from blasting associated with seismic exploration and road/site preparation, maintenance activities, or by spills; and safety hazards from equipment, pressurized vessels and lines, presence of hydrogen sulfide gas, and leaking oil and gas that can create explosion and fire hazards.22

in most terrestrial areas, including remote wilderness sites. Increased noise levels reduce the distance and area over which acoustic signals can be perceived by animals... Effective management of protected areas must include noise assessment.


This article investigates the extent to which public comments in federal regulatory proceedings involving proposed regulation governing shale gas extraction have tracked the concerns of experts. Public participation is a significant element of the democratic process. But there is debate about the impact of public participation on federal regulatory decision-making. This article looks at whether public input reflects scientific concern.

II. WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

To understand the degree to which public opinion is supported by expert opinion, it is necessary to first review expert consensus on public health and environmental issues pertaining to fracking. In February 2013, Resources for the Future (“RFF”) announced the results of a study titled Pathways to Dialogue: What the Experts Say about the Environmental Risks of Shale Gas Development. The RFF study surveyed the opinions of experts on the environmental and public health risks of shale gas development.


of experts on shale gas extraction to determine and come to a consensus on risk. RFF surveyed 215 experts from government, industry, NGOs, and academia to produce the study.27

RFF sent out a survey asking experts to identify risk pathways in shale gas extraction.28 The experts had many areas of disagreement, but the goal of the RFF study was finding consensus pathways. RFF identified a list of twelve high priority “risk pathways” in which all 215 experts agreed that shale gas extraction operations could pose an environmental or health risk.29 The risks involved oil and gas extraction processes generally; only a handful of risks were particular to HVHF.30

First, all experts agreed that the process of clearing a site for drilling and building infrastructure could present an environmental burden by interrupting or tainting stormwater flows and by causing habitat fragmentation, as well as impact nearby surface waste quality and cause habitat disruption.31 Second, experts agreed that venting of methane could impact air quality, both during the drilling process and during the fracturing and completion.32

Third, experts agreed that withdrawal of vast quantities of freshwater (from either surface or groundwater) could impact the availability of accessible water causing both water quantity issues and water quality problems.33 Resulting water shortages could have an important impact on population health and the environment. In addition, storing chemicals used in fracturing (called “fracturing fluids”) on site to use during hydraulic fracturing poses risks to surface waters.


27 See supra note 26.
28 Krupnick & Gordon, supra note 26.
29 PATHWAYS TO DIALOGUE, supra note 26, at 26, 54.
30 RISK OF SHALE GAS: KEY FINDINGS, supra note 26, at 2–3.
31 Krupnick & Gordon, supra note 26; see also STEVEN HABICHT, LARS HANSON & PAUL FAETH, CNA ANALYSIS & SOLUTIONS, THE POTENTIAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT FROM FRACKING IN THE DELAWARE RIVER BASIN (2015). For an analysis of potential habitat disruption during seismic studies, see NAT’L PARK SERV., ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR A PROPOSED OIL AND GAS PLAN OF OPERATIONS: NOBLES GRAD 3-D SEISMIC SURVEY WITHIN BIG CYPRESS NATIONAL PRESERVE PROPOSED BY BURNETT OIL CO., INC. (2015).
32 Krupnick & Gordon, supra note 26.
33 Id.; see also Meagan S. Mauter et al., Regional Variation in Water-Related Impacts of Shale Gas Development and Implications for Emerging International Plays, 48 ENVTL. SCI. & TECH. 8298 (2014).
Fourth, all experts agreed there were risks from the storage and disposal of flowback and produced waters. The practice of onsite pit or pond storage of flowback and produced waters, which contain both fracturing fluids, total dissolved solids (“TDS”), and naturally

34 For studies discussing health risks from flowback, see, e.g., Noura Abualfaraj, Patrick L. Gurian & Mira S. Olson, Characterization of Marcellus Shale Flowback Water, 31 ENVT'L. ENG’G SCI. 514 (2014); Ronald S. Balaba & Ronald B. Smart, Total Arsenic and Selenium Analysis in Marcellus Shale, High-Salinity Water, and Hydrofracture Flowback Wastewater, 89 CHEMOSPHERE 1437 (2012).


37 See Elizabeth C. Chapman et al., Geochemical and Strontium Isotope Characterization of Produced Waters from Marcellus Shale Natural Gas Extraction, 46 ENVT'L. SCI. & TECH. 3545 (2012) (“Extraction of natural gas by hydraulic fracturing of the Middle Devonian Marcellus Shale, a major gas-bearing unit in the Appalachian Basin, results in significant quantities of produced water containing high total dissolved solids (TDS).”); Brian E. Fontenot et al., An Evaluation of Water Quality in Private Drinking Water Wells Near Natural Gas Extraction Sites in the Barnett Shale Formation, 47 ENVT'L. SCI. & TECH. 10032 (2013) (“Analyses revealed that arsenic, selenium, strontium and total dissolved solids (TDS) exceeded the Environmental Protection Agency’s Drinking Water Maximum Contaminant Limit (MCL) in some samples.”). Kelvin B. Gregory, Radisav D. Vidic & David A. Dzombak, Water Management Challenges Associated with the Production of Shale Gas by Hydraulic Fracturing, 7.3 ELEMENTS 181 (2011) (“Wastewaters that contain high TDS levels are challenging and costly to treat.”).
occurring radioactive materials ("NORM") or technologically enhanced naturally occurring radioactive materials ("TENORM")\textsuperscript{38} acquired from the geological formation on site was universally recognized as a risk to both ground and surface waters. Pits and ponds were susceptible to leaks and accidents, especially in adverse weather events.\textsuperscript{39} The treatment of flowback and produced waters by both municipally owned treatment


\textsuperscript{39} \textit{PATHWAYS TO DIALOGUE}, supra note 26 (according to the experts the fluid burdens found in flowback and produced water were naturally occurring radioactive materials [NORM], aromatic hydrocarbons and hydrogen sulfide; the fluid burdens found in drilling fluids and cuttings were diesel oil and NORM; the fluid burdens found in fracturing fluids were oils, including diesel). \textit{See also} Brian G. Rahm et al., \textit{Shale Gas Operator Violations in the Marcellus and What They Tell Us About Water Resource Risks}, 82 ENERGY POL’Y 1 (2015); N.R. Warner, C.A. Christie, R.B. Jackson & A. Vengosh, \textit{Impacts of Shale Gas Wastewater Disposal on Water Quality in Western Pennsylvania}, 47 ENVTL. SCI. TECHN. 11849 (2013); A.K. Werner, S. Vink, K. Watt, P. Jagals, \textit{Environmental Health Impacts of Unconventional Natural Gas Development: A Review of the Current Strength of Evidence}, 505 SCI. TOTAL ENV’T 1127 (2015).
plants and industrial wastewater treatment plants was flagged as risky to surface water.\textsuperscript{40} Finally, improper or faulty cementing and casing was identified as a real risk to groundwater during both routine operations and due to accidents. Methane contamination of both surface and groundwater was identified as a risk during drilling, due to poor construction or accidents. In particular, casing accidents were a concern in causing methane contamination of groundwater. Cementing accidents could lead to groundwater problems due to exposure from methane, drilling cuttings, drilling fluids, fracturing fluids, flowback, and produced waters.\textsuperscript{41}
I identified the following docketed depicted in Table 1 for review:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Docket</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Number of Comments Posted</th>
<th>Number of Comments Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Solicitation for Data Related to Hydraulic Fracturing</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>EPA</td>
<td>1,841</td>
<td>1,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*EPA-HQ-ORD-2010-0674</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil and Natural Gas Sector—New Source Performance Standards, National Emission Standards</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>EPA</td>
<td>1,746</td>
<td>252,744</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

43 We eliminated administrative notices such as Semiannual Regulatory Agendas and Public Plans. We also eliminated procedural notices that extended comment periods or otherwise added to data, documents or other materials to the existing docket. We eliminated Fish and Wildlife Service ("FWS") rulemakings regarding endangered or threatened species pursuant to the Endangered Species Act, rulemakings concerning greenhouse gas ("GHG") reporting and oil shale royalties. Finally, we eliminated the OSHA occupational exposure to crystalline silica docket (OSHA-2010-0034-1721). Although the OSHA proposed rule is clearly important to the oil and gas industry because of the use of sand in HVHF, we eliminated the OSHA silica docket from review because the data OSHA sought comments on was not included as a concern in the RFF consensus matrix. We eliminated ESA, GHG and oil shale royalty proceedings on similar grounds to the OSHA docket. While these matters are also clearly important to the oil and gas industry, the agencies posting the docket did not raise questions for comment that aligned with the RFF risk matrix. See, e.g., Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, 12-Month Finding on a Petition To List the Eastern Small-Footed Bat and the Northern Long-Eared Bat as Endangered or Threatened Species, Listing the Northern Long-Eared Bat as an Endangered Species, 78 Fed. Reg. 61,046 (Oct. 2, 2013); Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, Proposed Endangered Status for the Neosho Mucket, etc., 77 Fed. Reg. 63,440 (Oct. 16, 2012); Mandatory Reporting of Greenhouse Gases: Technical Revisions to the Electronics Manufacturing and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Systems Categories of the Greenhouse Gas Reporting Rule, 76 Fed. Reg. 56,010 (Sept. 9, 2011); Proposed Confidentiality Determinations for the Petroleum and Natural Gas Systems Source Category, and Amendments to Table A–7, of the Greenhouse Gas Reporting Rule, 77 Fed. Reg. 11,039 (Feb. 24, 11,039); Oil Shale Management—General, 78 Fed. Reg. 18,547 (Mar. 23, 2013); Occupational Exposure to Respirable Crystalline Silica, 78 Fed. Reg. 56,274 (Sept. 12, 2013).

44 Dockets depicted in Table 1 are organized by the notice to which comments evaluated are responding, the date on which the docket was opened, the agency receiving the comments, and the number of comments received by the date research was conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>for Hazardous Air Pollutants, and Control Techniques Guidelines</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>EPA</td>
<td>2,495</td>
<td>264,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydraulic Fracturing Chemicals and Mixtures Under the Toxic Substances Control Act</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>EPA</td>
<td>2,732</td>
<td>97,147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UIC Permitting Guidance for Oil and Gas Hydraulic Fracturing Activities Using Diesel Fuels</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>BLM</td>
<td>7,668</td>
<td>59,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil and Gas: Well Stimulation, Including Hydraulic Fracturing, on Federal and Indian Lands</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>BLM</td>
<td>5,723</td>
<td>1,348,563</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After a literature review, my research team developed a coding scheme to review the public comments submitted to the docket. We began by identifying whether the writers wrote as experts, and if so, in which category they self-identified: government, industry, academic, or NGO. Next we evaluated whether the comment was written de novo by the commenter or was copied from a model letter supplied by an organized group urging action. Most importantly, we evaluated the comments using the criteria the experts in the RFF study all agreed constituted real environmental and health risks posed by shale oil and gas extraction. Coders evaluated whether or not each comment letter discussed each of

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53 See supra notes 26–30 and accompanying text.
the sixteen codes. Table 2 depicts the sixteen codes derived from the RFF findings (along with at what stage in the shale extraction life cycle the experts thought the risk was most likely to occur):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Codes</th>
<th>Expert View on When Risk is Greatest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stormwater</td>
<td>Site preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitat</td>
<td>Site preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methane leakage</td>
<td>Drilling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water usage</td>
<td>Fracturing &amp; completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage of frac fluids</td>
<td>Fracturing &amp; completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting methane</td>
<td>Fracturing &amp; completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site pit/pond storage</td>
<td>Accidents, weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW treatment</td>
<td>Disposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Waste Treatment Plants</td>
<td>Disposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casing</td>
<td>Accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cementing</td>
<td>Accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NORM &amp; TENORM</td>
<td>Fracturing, disposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aromatic hydrocarbons</td>
<td>Fracturing &amp; completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydrogen sulfide</td>
<td>Fracturing &amp; completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel oil</td>
<td>Fracturing &amp; completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>Fracturing &amp; completion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The docket was printed out and indexed in a sortable spreadsheet using the docket identification number assigned by the agency on Regulations.gov. A sample set of comments was reviewed collectively so coders could define terms and develop a consistent approach. Two coders divided all the indexed comments and commenced coding half the materials; the coders then reviewed each other’s findings and used a spreadsheet to keep track of results. An additional coder (who was not part of the initial review and did not participate in the first round of coding) was assigned to spot check results to ensure consistency. The additional coder selected random comments reviewed using an interval of 10 percent of the total number of comments reviewed in the docket to be sure of agreement.54 Use of Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data

54 For an explanation of the methods used to develop codes and conduct coding, see David Presley et al., Creating Legal Data for Public Health Monitoring and Evaluation: Delphi Standards
Analysis Software (“CAQDAS”) allowed coders to cross-check for consistency using autocoding of key words and synonyms. Once complete, the results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine patterns and themes.

IV. Analysis

A. EPA Oil and Natural Gas Sector: New Source Performance Standards and National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants Reviews (EPA-HQ-ORD-2010-0674)

The first docket opened by EPA allowed review of air themes concerning HVHF. On January 14, 2009, EPA established a docket in response to a complaint filed by WildEarth Guardians and the San Juan Citizens Alliance that urged EPA to take action over the review and potential revision of the New Source Performance Standards (“NSPS”) and the National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants (“NESHAP”) for the Oil and Natural Gas Production source category.55 EPA previously promulgated NSPS for two source categories covered by the oil and gas industry: one category addressed volatile organic compound (“VOC”) emissions from leaking components at onshore natural gas processing plants,56 and the second category regulates sulfur

55 The complaint was made pursuant to section 304(a)(2) of the Clean Air Act (“CAA”). The complaint alleged that EPA failed to meet its obligations under CAA sections 111(b)(1)(B), 112(d)(6) and 112(f)(2). See Oil & Natural Gas Sector, New Source Performance Standards and National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants Review, 76 Fed. Reg. 52,738 (proposed Aug. 23, 2011) (to be codified at 40 C.F.R. pts. 60 & 63) (comments entered to Docket No. EPA-HQ-OAR-2010-0505-0002).

dioxide ("SO₂") emissions from natural gas processing plants.57 Although EPA had listed crude oil and natural gas production on its priority list of source categories where promulgation of greater NSPS regulations was needed as early as 1985,58 EPA had not previously set NSPS for oil and gas operations other than natural gas processing plants.

On February 4, 2010, EPA entered into a consent decree requiring EPA to develop proposed NSPS and NESHAP standards for the oil and gas production sector by July 28, 2011.59 On August 23, 2011, EPA issued the first in a series of proposed rulemaking outlining NSPS and NESHAPs for the oil and gas sector.60 Under the proposed rule, EPA expansively defined the oil and gas sector as including “operations involved in the extraction and production of oil and natural gas, as well as the processing, transmission and distribution of natural gas.”61 For the first time, EPA proposed air regulations that suggested operational standards for hydraulically fractured gas wells.

Environmental groups were enthusiastic about the plan to expand air regulations into greater aspects of oil and gas operations.62 EPA reported 248,349 letters from numerous environmental NGOs supporting the proposed EPA air regulations. Organizing groups included: the Clean Air Council (270 comments), Credo Action (58,678 comments), Earthjustice (58,723 comments), the Environmental Defense Fund (41,454 comments), the League of Conservation Voters (1,027 comments), the National Wildlife Federation (35,748 comments), Natural Resources Defense Council (10,769 comments), PennEnvironment (5,642 comments), Sierra Club (25,716 comments), and the WildEarth Guardians (1,667 comments). An unknown group also mounted a significant letter writing campaign favoring promulgation of further air regulations for the oil and gas industry (including HVHF), and it produced 8,655 letters. In addition, about 200 public writers wrote comments that varied language slightly to avoid grouping as a mass

59 In the alternative, EPA could make a determination by July 28, 2011 that EPA need not issue standards pursuant to CAA sections 111(b)(1)(B), 112(d)(6) and 112(h)(2). See Oil & Natural Gas Sector, New Source Performance Standards and National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants Review, 76 Fed. Reg. at 52,743. EPA also agreed to take final action by February 28, 2012. Id.
60 Id. at 52,745.
61 Id. at 52,744.
62 Id. (comments entered to Docket No. EPA-HQ-OAR-2010-0505-0002).
mailing.  The letter expressed support for the EPA regulation and raised concern that the oil and gas industry was mounting a powerful campaign to avoid air regulation.

As required, comments in the air docket focused on air issues concerning HVHF and related operations. Since water issues were outside the scope of the EPA request for comments, most sophisticated entities submitting detailed reviews with legal and scientific citation either omitted water issues or mentioned water only in passing. Following requested procedure, sophisticated parties commented on that which the agency asked for feedback: air pollution from the oil and gas sector. Applying the RFF risk matrix factors, slightly over half of the posted comments discussed concerns about methane, while 4 percent discussed concerns about radiation and 14 percent discussed aromatic hydrocarbons. The other issues identified by the experts in the RFF matrix were all discussed by only a handful of commenters; lack of discussion of non-air risk factors was not surprising since the focus of the proposed regulation was on air emissions and the agency had requested comments that pertained to the scope of the proposed regulation.

The Community Municipal and Environmental Liaison for the Commissioner of Wyoming County wrote in support of EPA’s proposal to modernize the oil and gas industry’s air quality control regulations. Wyoming County recognized that while shale oil and gas was a critical industry for the state economy, “many of the provisions of the CAA are insufficient for industrial activity with the density of exploration and production activities, coupled with locations nearby so many homes.” The County concluded that the “CAA was not created with the activity relative to shale oil and gas exploitation [in mind]” and hence modified rules would be important to balance environmental health and economic

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64 See, e.g., Anonymous, Comment Letter on Proposed Rule, Oil and Natural Gas Sector: Emission Standards for New and Modified Sources, Docket No. EPA-HQ-OAR-2010-0505-5438 (Nov. 5, 2015); see also Anonymous #5475, supra note 63 (“Recently I also heard that Exxon (I think it was that company) learned some years ago that emissions had a negative impact on the environment but chose to ignore it.”).


66 Id.

67 Id.
needs. The National Association of Clean Air Agencies ("NACAA") agreed and urged EPA "to set an NSPS for methane emissions from the oil and natural gas industry since this would be an important mechanism for reducing emissions of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas as well as an ozone precursor."68

Industry disagreed with the assessment of local governments and environmental groups. For example, Trilogy Operating, Inc. wrote to "request that EPA withdraw these Rules because they are unnecessary to protect human health and the environment, and the costs that they will impose on the oil and gas industry are not justified by the minute reduction in global greenhouse gases that could result if the Rules are adopted as proposed."69 The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality ("TCEQ") agreed,70 stating that, "[f]rom a regulatory perspective these rules will significantly increase the permitting and enforcement workload for TCEQ as the delegated administrator." 71 TCEQ also asserted that implementation of the proposed rules would dramatically increase the fiscal burden on Texas.72

EPA published a final NSPS for the oil and natural gas sector on August 16, 2012.73 Industry representatives filed petitions for administrative reconsideration of certain aspects of the NSPS standards immediately. Among issues raised were time-critical procedures related to storage vessel provisions and well completion provisions. Accordingly, on July 17, 2014, EPA published proposed amendments and clarifications of the regulations regarding technical issues concerning, inter alia, well completions and storage vessels. EPA combined all comments on the NSPS standard in one docket. In all, EPA reported that

71 Id.
72 Id.
it received 1,279,037 comments on NSPS in the oil and natural gas sector, of which 6,841 were posted.\textsuperscript{74}

The NPS docket shows clear patterns. Members of the general public wrote the bulk of comments submitted to EPA. The vast majority of comments were part of campaigns mounted by environmental groups. Most individual comments submitted to the docket (that were not duplicates of the environmental campaigns) reflected the sentiments set out by environmental groups. A relatively small number of self-identified experts submitted comments to the docket. These experts presented polarized conclusions on the need for regulation but many concurred with the issues raised in the RFF risk matrix.

Graph A below depicts the numbers of times comment writers referenced the topics in the RFF risk matrix:

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\textsuperscript{74} See Oil & Natural Gas Sector, New Source Performance Standards and National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants Reviews, 76 Fed. Reg. 52,738 (proposed Aug. 23, 2011) (to be codified at 40 C.F.R. pts. 60 & 63) (comments entered to Docket No. EPA-HQ-OAR-2010-0505-0002). As of the date this article was written, 905,969 comments were sent in response to the 2015 proposal “to amend the new source performance standards (NSPS) for the oil and natural gas source category by setting standards for both methane and volatile organic compounds (VOC) for certain equipment, processes and activities across this source category.” Oil and Natural Gas Sector: Emissions Standards for New and Modified Sources, 80 Fed. Reg. 56,593 (Sept. 18, 2015) (comments entered to Docket No. EPA-HQ-OAR-2010-0505). 19 comments were sent to EPA in response to EPA’s proposed definition of “low pressure gas well.” See Oil and Natural Gas Sector: Definitions of Low Pressure Gas Well and Storage Vessels, 80 Fed. Reg. 15,180 (Mar. 23, 2015) (comments entered to Docket No. EPA-HQ-OAR-2010-0505).
The polarity in comments reflects two primary factors. First, EPA requested comments on matters pertaining to air, so most commenters adhered to administrative requirements and focused on air pollution concerns. Second, the relatively low number of comments pertaining to RFF’s detailed risk matrix concerns reflects the similarly low number of experts submitting comments. Most comments submitted by the general public were based on templates provided by environmental groups. Most were a page or less and contained little or no legal or scientific citation. Most comments merely indicated general support for the proposed environmental regulation and fear of environmental contamination from industry.

On December 31, 2014, EPA promulgated final NSPS regulations for the oil and natural gas sector incorporating amendments and technical corrections that were inadvertently included in the first set of “final standards.”

EPA issued two additional air rules governing the oil and gas sector (including HVHF) in June 2016. The first is designed to reduce methane and VOCs from the oil and natural gas sector. The second clarified the definition of what is meant by an “adjacent building, structure, facility or installation” for purposes of determining whether a “stationary source” in the oil and gas sector is subject to regulation for purposes of the Prevention of Significant Deterioration (“PSD”) and Nonattainment New Source Review (“NNSR”) programs. According to EPA, the rule also defines “major source” for purposes of the Title V program as applied to the oil and natural sector.

B. EPA Drinking Water Study #1

The second docket examined was EPA’s study of the potential effect of hydraulic fracturing on drinking water, first opened in 2010. On November 9, 2012, EPA requested “data and scientific literature to

78 Id.
80 Id. (comments entered to Docket No. EPA-HQ-ORD-2010-0674).
inform EPA’s research on the potential impacts of hydraulic fracturing on drinking water resources.81 Congress urged EPA to identify factors that may affect the severity and frequency of HVHF on drinking water.82

EPA defined the scope of the study as including “the full hydraulic fracturing water lifecycle—from water acquisition, through the mixing of chemicals and injection of fracturing fluids, to the post fracturing stage, including the management of flowback and produced water and its ultimate treatment and disposal.”83 For purposes of the study, EPA used the term “hydraulic fracturing” in the expansive manner used in the popular press (including the entire shale gas extraction life cycle) rather than in the restrictive manner used by industry (as just one step in the process designed to stimulate well production).84

The EPA drinking water study began with a review of the published literature, analyzed existing data, enlisted scenario evaluation and modeling, laboratory studies and case studies. EPA posted three primary and ninety-two supporting documents in the docket reflecting the data the gathered from its review.85 As administrative law requires, EPA invited public comment. The agency requested materials that would ensure its review was thorough and included all relevant data. EPA warned that deference would be given to peer reviewed information.86 Interested persons could provide scientific analyses, studies, and other pertinent scientific information, but strong preference would be given to peer reviewed data and peer reviewed literature.

At the request of the public, EPA extended the deadline for data submissions from April 30, 2013 to November 15, 2013.87 Once the docket was closed EPA reported 1,749 comments received, of which 1,746 were posted on Regulations.gov.88 The vast majority of comments—79 percent—were signed. Only 138 comments were submitted anonymously. The majority of comments came from private

81 Id.
82 Id.
83 Id.
86 Id.
citizens (1,384 comments), but government (68 comments), industry (127 comments), academics (40 comments), and NGOs (127 comments) were all represented. Most of the comments (1,619) were written as original prose, but about 6 percent of the comments (115) were copied from prewritten letters prepared by NGOs and environmental groups. The Damascus Citizens for Sustainability submitted 61 comments. Democracy for America collected a petition with 3,411 signatures.89

In general, the comments submitted to the EPA drinking water docket fell into predictable patterns. The 127 comments submitted by industry generally opposed EPA regulation of HVHF, stating that state regulations were sufficiently protective and adding a federal overlay would be duplicative, cause unnecessary expense and delay, and complicate an already heavily regulated industry. Environmental groups typically encouraged either federal regulation or outright ban on the process. Comments by environmental groups fell into two categories: detailed comments by the entities and short letters to be used as templates for comment by the public.

Private citizens expressed concern and welcomed inquiry into the need for further federal oversight.90 An example read:

> We need real protection of our water and health, communities and livelihoods, farms and pets, and the wild things that live in our ecosystems. Untested claims and assurances about the harmlessness of fracking are not enough to protect our water and our lives.91

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90 See, e.g., J. Pierpont, Comment Letter on Request for Information to Inform Hydraulic Fracturing Research Related to Drinking Water Resources, Docket No. EPA-HQ-ORD-2010-0674-0067 (Feb. 10, 2011); see also Anonymous, Comment Letter on Request for Information to Inform Hydraulic Fracturing Research Related to Drinking Water Resources, Docket No. EPA-HQ-ORD-2010-0674-1757 (Nov. 20, 2013) (listing as important concerns: (1) use of drinking water, (2) improper frac-well construction, (3) oversight needed to prevent excessive pressure and volume injection into the disposal zone that can cause minor earthquakes, (4) disposal of frac flow-back fluid and solids, as the contents cannot be handled by typical wastewater treatment plants, (5) disposal of shale cuttings with elevated radiation, (6) full “state control over the use of gas/oil/water/air natural resources which collectively are national resources for the greater good”, (7) the dangerous practice of “the law of capture” as it could “destroy the porosity/permeability of drinking water aquifers and possibly decrease the water recovery yield”, (8) lack of details (depth, casing, location) about historical well (public, private) penetrations (1860s-1950+) and their abandonment practices as “old wells are open straws that can allow cross connections between the water aquifers and the drilling fluids and gas encountered while drilling”, (9) lack of baseline chemistry and fundamental attributes of private drinking water wells, and (10) the paucity of baseline data needed to both prevent misguided complaints directed).

Most comments took seriously the EPA mandate that the agency could only consider serious scientific concerns at the industry and help mitigate contamination issues due to poor drilling practices.\textsuperscript{92} An anonymous comment supplied detailed discussion of concerns about drilling practices:\textsuperscript{93}

There are now over 80 producing gas wells in this immediate study area, where I live, many of which are constantly venting gas to the atmosphere in order to relieve pressure off of the shallow formation that you are talking about. Those wells act as conduits, from thousands of feet down into the Williams Fork formation all the way up through the Wasatch - some of which is not sealed by cement, that introduces the risk of migrating methane just as it does for water to travel through the already fractured geology as well as through fractures that are induced through hydraulic fracturing activity.\textsuperscript{94}

The writer was extremely frustrated with the protections availed to his community by the state, explaining that the “only conclusion that can then be drawn from such an effort is how corruptible both the democratic and scientific process can become.”\textsuperscript{95} As a scientific matter, the commenter said that the fact “that thermogenic methane contamination is more saturated . . . is also very telling.”\textsuperscript{96}

In sum, the pattern established in the NSPS docket arose again in the first EPA drinking water study. Most comments submitted by the general public were short, less detailed, and expressed general fear. Comments discussing the RFF risk matrix factors were more likely to be discussed by self-identified experts. Public comments did indeed reflect the concerns of the RFF consensus pathways, although the degree discussed varied in proportion to the relative number of comments submitted by self-identified experts, as shown in Graph B below:

\textsuperscript{92} See, e.g., Id.
\textsuperscript{94} Id.
\textsuperscript{95} Id.
\textsuperscript{96} Id.
Taken as a whole, and without differentiating between experts and members of the general public, the vast majority of comments focused on concerns about impact to drinking water due to storage of chemicals used for HVHF and on-site pit or pond storage of flowback and produced waters. Concerns about radiological exposure and technological failures in casing and cementing, while reflected, were less robustly shared; these concerns seemed to be expressed by expert commenters rather than comments submitted by the general public. In fact, the proportion of comments discussing the technical concerns raised by the RFF experts was proportional to the expertise of the commenter. Comments by the general public tended to be short and expressed the general need for protecting drinking water, but without significant legal or scientific citation.

C. EPA Drinking Water Study #2

EPA concluded its drinking water study and posted a draft assessment on June 4, 2015.\(^{97}\) Public comment on the draft assessment continued

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\(^{97}\) U.S. EPA, **Assessment of the Potential Impacts of Hydraulic Fracturing for Oil and Gas on Drinking Water Resources (External Review Draft)** (2015). For a summary, see U.S. EPA, **Assessment of the Potential Impacts of Hydraulic Fracturing for Oil**
until August 28, 2015, but EPA, as of this writing, has not published the final assessment. The August 2015 findings are very controversial. On January 7, 2016, the EPA Science Advisory Board (“SAB”) issued a draft report to EPA administrator Gina McCarthy stating that “the SAB has concerns regarding the clarity and adequacy of support for several major findings ... that seek to draw national-level findings regarding the impacts of hydraulic fracturing on drinking water resources.”

Environmental groups echoed the SAB request.

EPA reported that 106,281 comments were submitted critiquing the draft assessment during the public comment period between June 4 and August 28, 2015. Three hundred fifty-six comments were posted to the docket, including late filings. The difference between reported and posted comments is attributable to mass write-in campaigns by five groups: Breast Cancer Action, Environment Action, League of Women Voters, Union of Concerned Scientists, and Food and Water Watch. Together, the write-in campaigns represented over 106,000 individuals—a large contrast with the initial EPA drinking water docket.
where only 1,749 comments were posted in total. Like the prior EPA docket, the majority of submitted comments were signed, but about one-third of the posted comments (94) were written anonymously. The anonymous public comments again reflected frustration with EPA’s ability to protect the public from environmental perils related to HVHF.107

From the perspective of patterns in public discourse, the second EPA drinking water docket is a paradox of contradictions. Although there were significantly fewer posted comments in the docket for the second round of the EPA Drinking Water Study, there was a very dramatic increase in interest and participation by the general public. Signed comments were more specific than many of those made anonymously. Again, industry, NGOs, and governments typically submitted detailed attachments outlining very specific concerns with support from scientific and legal citations. The comments of industry and NGOs were again characteristically polarized in interpreting similar data.108

Although typically lacking scientific or legal citation, individuals submitting written comments to the EPA docket often captured similar concerns as those identified by the RFF experts. For example, retired chemical and environmental safety engineer Ted Stroter wrote, “[i]t has also been shown by state environmental agencies and independent researchers that well cement failures are all too routine. The well failures, the high pressures used in fracturing and injection disposal have all led to pathways to water contamination . . . .I have personally reviewed over 240 cases of well water contamination in Pennsylvania alone. Among the contaminants found were methane, manganese, aluminum, iron, and barium, among others.” Another commenter describing himself as a “loyal servant of the Oil/Gas industry” and a member of the little River Band of Ottawa Indians, stated that it is his experience that “radiation levels are at all-time high in drill cutting and the flow back from HVHF.”109 Both agreed that they “can’t stress enough” the “safety issue to local communities in the migration of chemicals used by the industry, getting into their fresh water well.”110

110 Id.
Although comments from the public addressing the draft EPA Drinking Water study again reflected some of the concerns of the RFF consensus pathways, the degree again varied as shown in Graph C1 below:

A comparison of the two EPA drinking water dockets indicates that the relative numbers of individuals expressing concerns about each of the elements in the RFF expert matrix are consistent, as can be seen in Graph C2 below:
Although the EPA Drinking Water Study remains controversial, EPA’s regulatory agenda for 2016 includes regulatory proposals that address the protection of water in HVHF. EPA published regulations governing disposal of the large quantities of unconventional oil and gas extraction wastewater generated in the HVHF process in June 2016. The agency said these wastes “can be generated in large quantities and contain constituents that are potentially harmful to human health and the environment.” EPA explained that “wastewater from UOG [unconventional oil and gas] wells often contains high concentrations of salt content, also called total dissolved solids or TDS,” hence the need for federal regulation. While this UOG regulation grows out of a notice and comment posted in a later EPA docket, the seeds of need for such regulation of fracking wastewater were sown in the early EPA drinking water studies still under consideration by the agency and the public.

D. UIC Permitting Guidance for Oil and Gas Hydraulic Fracturing Activities Using Diesel Fuels (EPA-HQ-OW-2011-1013)

When Congress enacted the Energy Policy Act of 2005, the Safe Drinking Water Act (“SDWA”) was revised so the definition of “underground injection” specifically excluded “underground injection of fluids or propping agents (other than diesel fuels) pursuant to hydraulic fracturing operations related to oil, gas, or geothermal production activities” from Underground Injection Control (“UIC”) regulation. Thus, the SDWA generally exempted HVHF from SDWA permit requirements. Despite this exemption in the 2005 law, oil and gas operators who inject diesel fuels during HVHF must still obtain a UIC Class II permit.

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113 Id. at 41,847.


When creating the HVHF exclusion from SDWA permit requirements, the 2005 statute did not, however, specify whether there was a threshold concentration or percentage of diesel fuels in HVHF injectate that would qualify for the exclusion. EPA said that it did not have reliable data about volumes and frequency with which diesel fuel is used in HVHF fluids or as propping agents. Accordingly, on May 10, 2012, EPA posted a request for comments seeking data about use of diesel in HVHF and querying the public whether there was some de minimis level of diesel fuel constituents in HVHF fluids or propping agents that should be used to determine what is within the bounds of SDWA UIC regulation. EPA asked that those who supported applying a de minimis standard for purpose of establishing regulatory jurisdiction should also explain how a de minimis standard should best be defined or described, along with legal and scientific citation justifying the reasoning behind the commenter’s recommendation.

EPA’s 2012 docket described the agency’s proposed guidance for permitting the underground injection of oil and gas-related HVHF using diesel fuels as a fracturing fluid or as a component of a fracturing fluid in jurisdictions where EPA was the Class II UIC permitting authority. EPA said its goal was “to provide greater regulatory clarity and certainty to the industry, which will in turn improve compliance with the SDWA requirements and strengthen environmental protections consistent with existing law.” EPA was emphatic that the draft guidance would not impose any new regulatory requirements on industry—the proposal merely sought to clarify UIC Class II permitting rules.

Comments were accepted from May 10 until August 23, 2012. EPA reported that 97,417 were received in the docket. Of those, EPA posted 2,732 comments for public view on Regulations.gov. The difference was attributable to mass write-in campaigns by individuals following the lead of organized environmental groups. The vast majority of comments posted to the docket were signed; only twenty comments to the UIC docket were submitted anonymously. Most comments (2,594) posted to the docket were written by private individuals, but tribes (1), industry (79), environmental groups and NGOs (300) also participated.

Again, the comments showed a distinction between those written by experts and those written by the general public. A notable number

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117 Id. at 27,454.
118 Id. at 27,451.
119 Id.
120 Id.
of comments (898) submitted by the general public expressed concern that they could not trust the oil and gas industry to adhere to safe practices that would protect drinking water.121 Seven-hundred eight writers quoted a 2004 EPA report finding the use of diesel fuel in HVHF poses a great threat to underground sources of drinking water.122

In part due to mistrust of oil and gas corporations, many writers from the general public urged EPA to ban the practice of using diesel in HVHF altogether.123 Nine-hundred six commenters asked EPA to “protect my drinking water and ban the use of diesel fuel and diesel fuel by-products in fracking fluids.”124 Many explained concern that diesel used in fracking could lead to BTEX (benzene, toluene, ethyl benzene and xylenes) contamination of drinking water,125 a danger because BTEX chemicals “are human carcinogens, and chronic exposure can damage the central nervous system, liver and kidneys.”126

Many commenters from the general public favoring a ban of HVHF recognized a ban was unlikely due to legal and political constraints. In the alternative, these writers said, “if a total ban is not put in place, then the strongest possible protections must be required through formal rulemaking to give these protections the force of law.”127 One-hundred one comments from the general public pleaded with EPA to “protect public health.”

Although EPA attempted to screen mass campaigns, our review of the docket indicated that many of the public comments were variations of recommended language from an unnamed organizer. As such, the vast majority of the comments posted on the docket contained only general comments and not detailed, cited responses to the questions EPA asked to be addressed. Accordingly, while nearly all the comments discussed concerns about water usage, drinking water contamination, and use of diesel in HVHF, relatively few addressed the other items identified in the RFF risk matrix. In fact, almost all the comments raising issues identified in the RFF consensus matrix were made by experts—either in industry or in the environmental groups.

122 See, e.g., id.
124 See, e.g., L. Croxson, supra note 121.
125 See, e.g., V. Marino, supra note 123.
126 See, e.g., Croxson, supra note 121.
127 V. Marino, supra note 123.
Graph D below records the numbers of commenters discussing the RFF matrix factors in the UIC docket:

![Graph D: UIC Permitting Guidance for Oil and Gas Hydraulic Fracturing Activities Using Diesel Fuels: EPA-HQ-OW-2011-1013 (N=2732)]

The limited industry comments tended to oppose regulation, but offered more detailed analysis based on technicalities understood by the oil and gas industry and not by the general public.

In February 2014, EPA issued a technical guidance document establishing technical recommendations for protecting underground sources of drinking water (“USDWs”) from potential endangerment posed from HVHF activities where diesel fuels are used. The guidance defined diesel by applying five Chemical Abstract Service Registry Numbers (“CASRN”). The guidance only applied to circumstances where diesel was used in injection. Use of diesel is not subject to UIC Class II permitting in non-injection purposes.

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129 Id.

E. Hydraulic Fracturing Chemicals and Mixtures Under the Toxic Substances Control Act

EPA’s proposed rulemaking on Hydraulic Fracturing Chemicals and Mixtures Under the Toxic Substances Control Act (“TSCA”) was the fourth docket coded. Like the NSPS-proposed rulemaking, the TSCA docket was created in response to public pressure. On August 4, 2011, EPA received a petition from Earthjustice and 114 other environmental groups pursuant to section 21 of TSCA. The citizen-petition urged EPA to amend regulations promulgated pursuant to TSCA sections 4 and 8 to require toxicity testing of chemicals (and chemical mixtures) used in all phases of oil and gas exploration and production, including HVHF. The petition was filed in response to increased public concern over the dramatic rise of HVHF throughout the country. The petition sought enhanced reporting requirements by oil and gas companies to EPA identifying chemicals and mixtures used in the hydraulic fracturing life cycle and identified in the EPA drinking water study. The chemical reporting requirement proposed in the Earthjustice petition would also mandate disclosure of known health and safety studies on the oil and gas chemicals and mixtures used in different phases of shale mineral extraction.

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132 Id. (comments entered to Docket No. EPA-HQ-OPPT-2011-1019).
133 Id.; see also Letter from Deborah Goldberg, Earthjustice to Wendy Cleland-Hamnett, Director, Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics, Re: Citizen Petition Under Toxic Substances Control Act Regarding the Chemical Substances and Mixtures Used in Oil and Gas Exploration or Production (Aug. 4, 2011), Docket No. EPA-HQ-OPPT-2011-1019-0004 (May 19, 2014); Letter from EPA Assistant Administrator Steven A. Owens to Deborah Goldberg, Earthjustice, Re: TSCA Section 21 Petition Concerning Chemical Substances and Mixtures Used in Oil and Gas Exploration or Production (Nov. 2, 2011), Docket No. EPA-HQ-OPPT-2011-1019-0004 (May 19, 2014); Letter from Assistant Administrator Steven A. Owens to Deborah Goldberg, Earthjustice, Re: TSCA Section 21 Petition Concerning Chemical Substances and Mixtures Used in Oil and Gas Exploration or Production (Nov. 23, 2011), Docket No. EPA-HQ-OPPT-2011-1019-0007 (May 19, 2014).
135 Id. § 2607. TSCA section 8(a) gives EPA authority to require chemical manufacturers and processors to maintain records and submit to EPA such reports as EPA may reasonably require. 79 Fed. Reg. at 28,665–66.
137 Id.
138 See supra note 97 and accompanying text.
139 40 C.F.R. § 716.3 (2016) gives examples of health and safety studies.
Initially, EPA denied the Earthjustice petition. On November 2, 2011, EPA explained that the Earthjustice request for issuance of a “test rule” could not be granted because the petition did not set forth sufficient facts to conclude that it was “necessary to issue” the rule, as is required by TSCA section 21(b)(1). Less than three weeks later, however, on November 23, 2011, EPA reversed itself and granted in part and denied in part the Earthjustice requests.

In so doing, EPA limited the scope of the proposed rulemaking from chemicals and mixtures used in all processes of oil and gas exploration and production to focus only on those chemical substances and mixtures used in hydraulic fracturing. EPA’s use of the term hydraulic fracturing was not, however, clear or well defined. As in the EPA drinking water study, EPA seemed to use the term “hydraulic fracturing” as a broad term, including more aspects of the shale gas extraction process than those used by the oil and gas industry, who identify hydraulic fracturing only as a very specific step in extraction designed to stimulate well production.

On May 19, 2014, EPA published an advance notice of proposed rulemaking (“ANPR”) soliciting stakeholder input on various aspects of the Earthjustice petition. EPA wanted more data on chemical substances and mixtures used in hydraulic fracturing for oil and gas exploration. Specific EPA inquiry centered on what is the appropriate level of disclosure needed to ensure that information about the chemicals and mixtures used in hydraulic fracturing activities are provided to the public in an appropriate and transparent fashion. The agency sought particular guidance on certain oil and gas activities, including: 1) injecting water, chemicals, proppant, and/or tracers to prepare geologic formations for hydraulic fracturing; 2) completing the hydraulic fracturing stimulation stage; and 3) evaluating the extent of resulting

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140 See Letter from EPA Assistant Administrator Steven A. Owens to Deborah Goldberg, Earthjustice, Re: TSCA Section 21 Petition Concerning Chemical Substances and Mixtures Used in Oil and Gas Exploration or Production (Nov. 2, 2011), supra note 133.

141 Letter from Assistant Administrator Steven A. Owens to Deborah Goldberg, Earthjustice, Re: TSCA Section 21 Petition Concerning Chemical Substances and Mixtures Used in Oil and Gas Exploration or Production (Nov. 23, 2011), supra note 133.


143 For a discussion of industry’s perspective that EPA misuses the term “hydraulic fracturing” in a way that is misleading to the public, see, e.g., Bruce Thompson, supra note 84.


145 Id.

146 Id. at 28,665.
fractures to ensure future ability to enhance production through stimulation by hydraulic fracturing.\textsuperscript{147}

In its directives, EPA requested feedback on both data and mechanisms. EPA invited input, including further research needed, about chemicals and mixtures used in hydraulic fracturing. EPA also wanted to know how data concerning HVHF chemicals should be obtained or disclosed. Finally, EPA requested input on the mechanisms best suited to obtain or disclose the information.\textsuperscript{148}

EPA did not decree in the proposed rule that future chemical disclosure would be mandatory for the oil and gas industry engaged in HVHF.\textsuperscript{149} To the contrary, EPA expressly stated in the ANPR that the mechanism the agency was considering for disclosure of HVHF chemicals could be either regulatory,\textsuperscript{150} voluntary,\textsuperscript{151} or a combination of both. The ANPR explored regulatory need and the practicality of regulatory options. On the mechanistic side, EPA was particularly interested in:

best management practices for the generation, collection, reporting and/or disclosure of public health and environmental information from or by companies that manufacture, process, or use chemical substances or mixtures in hydraulic fracturing activities—that is, practices or operations that can be implemented and verified toward achieving protection of public health and the environment—and whether voluntary third-party certification, and incentives for disclosure could be valuable tools for improving chemical safety.\textsuperscript{152}

EPA cautioned that best practices should balance the need for publicly available data in concert with minimizing reporting costs and burdens on both industry and government.\textsuperscript{153} In conducting its inquiry, EPA set a goal of creating a system that would “avoid duplication of efforts” yet still “maximize transparency and public understanding.”\textsuperscript{154} As a parallel inquiry, EPA sought insight on incentive programs that could be used by EPA to support the development and use of safer chemicals in the shale mineral extraction life cycle.\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{147} Id.
\textsuperscript{148} Id. at 28,666.
\textsuperscript{149} Id.
\textsuperscript{150} Id. at 28,664. Regulatory requirements would be pursuant to TSCA section 8(a) and/or section 8(d). Id.
\textsuperscript{151} Voluntary requirements could be pursuant the Pollution Prevention Act (PPA). See 42 U.S.C. §§ 13101–09 (2012).
\textsuperscript{152} Hydraulic Fracturing Chemicals and Mixtures, 79 Fed. Reg. at 28,665.
\textsuperscript{153} Id.
\textsuperscript{154} Id.
\textsuperscript{155} Id.
EPA received 235,179 comments in the docket concerning the petition; of those, EPA posted 2,495.156 The discrepancy was due to duplicative write-in campaigns and petitions by about 232,684 writers. A large number of comments posted online were not signed—947 were anonymous. The majority (1,463 comments) were written by private citizens, but government (18 comments), industry (21 comments), and NGOs (38 comments) were all represented.

Although the agency screened for campaigns, our coding found that of the 2,473 comments posted on Regulations.gov, almost 70 percent of the comments (1,701 comments) were not original prose but had been duplicated from language suggested by an NGO or academic. These boilerplate comments were from five different campaigns originating from Breast Cancer Action (390 comments), Center for Environmental Health (23 comments), Union of Concerned Scientists (511 comments), Earthworks (369 comments), and Safer Chemicals (1,702 comments). Only 772 comments, a little over 30 percent of the posted comments, were original writings.

The overwhelming majority of the comments submitted to the docket supported EPA promulgating a regulation under TSCA requiring disclosure of chemicals. In fact, only thirty-nine comments submitted to the docket opposed the EPA proposal. An illustrative comment supporting the EPA TSCA proposals, and was signed by 9,088 people in the form of a petition in support of the regulation, read:

> Please require full public disclosure of all chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing, including any chemicals an oil and gas company might claim is a trade secret. Additionally, manufacturers and distributors of fracking chemicals should be required to conduct and report toxicity testing on all exploration and production chemicals to better understand the impacts to our public health. Greater transparency is an essential step towards protecting our communities from the dangers of fracking.


The majority of comments submitted that opposed the proposed revisions to TSCA regulation were written by members of the oil and gas...
industry or state and local governments. Industry comments generally indicated that the industry was already highly regulated and thus not in need of additional regulation, deeming the TSCA proposal expensive, duplicative, and overly intrusive. Industry comments indicated that regulation of oil and gas was best entrusted to the states, as EPA did not have the expertise to properly balance environmental and business needs best suited to promote public health. According to industry, the states had greater experience with regulation of oil and gas, were better suited to deal with industry permitting needs in a timely manner, and better reflected values of the community.

The majority of comments that were categorized as ambiguous were short comments submitted by members of the public without citation or scientific support. Many were anonymous. Some coded as ambiguous expressed displeasure with EPA without explaining what the writer wanted done to improve EPA performance or whether the specific regulation proposed should be promulgated as written; an example read, “[s]tart doing your job and protect us better!!!!!!”

Major themes that arose in the public comments included concern about habitat disruption, water usage, and water contamination. Discussions about risks from on-site storage of flowback and produced waters in pits, ponds, and other containment structures were found in the vast majority of comments. Concerns about damage from structural failure in casing and cementing were less discussed. Where the issues of casing and cementing were raised, however, both those who favored and those who opposed EPA’s proposed TSCA regulations acknowledged the importance of protective practices. Center for Biological Diversity wrote:

> It is unavoidable that a significant portion of wells will experience structural integrity problems over time. Cement failures can be attributed to hydrostatic imbalances caused by inappropriate

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160 See, e.g., IOGA-WV, supra note 158.

161 Id.; see also American Exploration and Production Council (AXPC) and Independent Petroleum Association of America (IPAA), supra note 158.


cement density, inadequately cleaned bore holes, premature gelation of the cement, excessive fluid loss in the cement, high permeability in the cement slurry, cement shrinkage, radial cracking due to pressure fluctuations in the casings, poor interfacial bonding, and normal deterioration with age. Casings may fail due to failed casing joints, casing collapse, and corrosion. A recent study of northeast Pennsylvania’s wells found that roughly 40 percent of unconventional wells are expected to experience an integrity issue within the first 7 years of operation.\(^{165}\)

Industry comments countered that casing and cementing practices by industry were adequate to protect groundwater:

... [I]ndustry has adopted numerous measures—such as cementing into place surface casing at the uppermost portions of wells—to prevent leakage. If those measures are followed, there is no evidence to suggest that the specific chemical mix used in connection with fracking (a mix whose composition is 99.5% water and sand and only .5% other chemicals) is relevant to degree of risk that groundwater might be contaminated.\(^{166}\)

The general public expressed doubt about state ability to protect public health and industry’s ability to self-police.\(^{167}\)

In sum, although the public comments reflected many concerns of the experts identified by RFF, the majority of comments written by the public did not mention factors deemed important in the RFF matrix. Writers discussing RFF concerns tended to self-identify as experts. Graph E below depicts the pattern of comments found in the TSCA docket discussing the factors in the RFF risk matrix:


EPA is currently reviewing the public comments and other documents and materials. EPA projects that the agency will promulgate a final rule on disclosure of HVHF chemicals and mixtures in December 2016.168

**F. Oil and Gas: Hydraulic Fracturing on Federal and Indian Lands (BLM-2012-0001-0001) 169**

EPA is not the only federal agency to evaluate the perceived need for regulation of HVHF. The federal government is the largest landowner in the United States. In certain circumstances, federal lands can be used by private entities for various purposes—including leasing federal property for oil and gas development. The Department of Interior (“DOI”) manages about 500 million acres of federal surface land (about 1/5 the landmass in the United States) through various subdivisions.170 DOI is charged with balancing the economic need to use and develop land with the duty to preserve property for future generations.

The DOI’s Bureau of Land Management (“BLM”) issued its first proposal to regulate HVHF on federal and Indian land on May 11, 2012.169

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170 U.S. DEP’T OF INTERIOR, INTRODUCTION TO INTERIOR ACQUISITIONS: A GUIDE FOR SMALL BUSINESSES (2010).
BLM had previously promulgated rules governing oil and gas development on BLM managed property. The existing BLM oil and gas regulations were, however, promulgated in 1982 and last revised in 1988, long before HVHF was widely used. According to BLM, public awareness of HVHF grew significantly as “new horizontal drilling technology allowed increased access to shale oil and gas resources across the country, sometimes in areas that have not previously experienced significant oil and gas development.” In 2012, the time of the initial proposal to revise the BLM oil and gas regulations, BLM estimated that about 90 percent of the approximately 3,400 wells per year being drilled on Federal and Indian lands were stimulated using HVHF.

The 2012 BLM proposal had three key elements. First, BLM proposed requiring disclosure to the public of chemicals used in HVHF on all leased federal land and on Indian land. Second, BLM sought to strengthen regulations related to well-bore integrity. Third, BLM set out an agenda outlining ways to address environmental and health issues related to flowback and produced waters. BLM said the “rule is necessary to provide useful information to the public and to assure that hydraulic fracturing is conducted in a way that adequately protects the environment.”

The BLM definition of “hydraulic fracturing” differed from the definition set out by EPA in its drinking water study. BLM defined “hydraulic fracturing” as “a process used to stimulate production from oil and gas wells.” BLM set out to address public concerns “about whether fracturing can allow or cause the contamination of underground water sources,” whether chemicals used in HVHF should be disclosed to the public, and whether there is adequate management of well integrity and “flowback” fluids. BLM’s proposed fracking rule was made after consulting the Secretary of Energy’s Advisory Board and gathering data at public hearings in Washington, DC, North Dakota, Arkansas and Colorado. BLM alleged its proposed HVHF rules were consistent with
the American Petroleum Institute’s ("API") guidelines for well construction and well integrity.\textsuperscript{179}

BLM explained that the agency developed the draft “with an eye toward improving public awareness and oversight without introducing complicated new procedures or delays in the process of developing oil and gas resources on public and Indian lands.”\textsuperscript{180} Although states with robust oil and gas economies had begun requiring disclosures and oversight for HVHF operations, the BLM proposal sought to create consistent federal oversight and disclosure across federal and Indian lands that would work in concert with state requirements.\textsuperscript{181}

BLM received 59,786 comments on its 2012 proposal to regulate HVHF on federal and Indian lands. Of the comment received, BLM posted 7,011 comments to the docket.\textsuperscript{182} The discrepancy of 52,775 comments was attributed to mass write in campaigns and petitions. Organizations spearheading petitions and write-in campaigns included: CREDO Action, Earthjustice, Environment America, Friends of the Earth, National Park Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, National Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, and Wilderness Society.

Of the 7,011 comments posted to the dockets, only 654 comments were signed. The vast majority of the posted comments were not signed; 6,357 comments submitted to BLM online were posted anonymously. Despite efforts by BLM to screen out mass campaigns so that duplicate comments did not obscure original contributions, our review found many letters that contained the same, almost identical or slightly individualized prose. Many of these letters were influenced by the vigorous campaigns mounted by the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and the National Park Conservancy. In total, 218 environmental groups and NGOs and twenty-eight religious organizations submitted comments. Ninety-three comments were submitted by state governments and Indian tribes. One-hundred fourteen comments were submitted by representatives of industry. Twenty academics opined on the BLM proposal.

The vast majority of public comments supported BLM’s proposal. About 2,815 individual and anonymous commenters wrote, “I hope that the rule will make sure that Americans know what chemicals are being used before wells are fractured and that the water left over is kept in

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\textsuperscript{179} Id. See also API GUIDANCE DOCUMENT, HYDRAULIC FRACTURING OPERATIONS—WELL CONSTRUCTION AND INTEGRITY GUIDELINES, AM. PETROLEUM INST. (1st ed., 2009).
\textsuperscript{180} Oil and Gas: Well Stimulation, Including Hydraulic Fracturing, on Federal and Indian Lands, 77 Fed. Reg. 27,691.
\textsuperscript{181} Id.
\textsuperscript{182} Id. (comments entered to Docket No. BLM-2012-0001).
\end{flushleft}
closed containers and handled safely. You have an opportunity to protect one of America’s finest resources; I hope you won’t pass it up. Another anonymous commenter said, “[t]he fracking industry’s own data shows that 6 [percent] of the wells will FAIL immediately. This will permanently contaminate the ground water.” Another pleaded:

Please tighten regulations on energy sourcing on public and Indian lands. These precious resources need to be safeguarded. Once they are gone, we can not recreate them. Please Protect the land and ban energy sourcing in our most treasured resources.

An unidentified campaign brought a flurry of 2,913 letters posted separately in the docket expressing support for BLM regulation and concern about HVHF on BLM controlled lands near National Parks. The campaign stated that “[o]il and gas drilling is occurring with an increasing frequency next to national park units. Much of this is happening on BLM-managed lands and it threatens water quality, air quality, and wildlife inside parks. I care deeply about our national parks and want BLM to protect them.” Individual comment writers also echoed concerns about preservation of parks and public lands:

I oppose fracking and would endorse protections for public wild lands and parks to maintain them in their natural state for future generations. It is my belief short term profiteering will have unknown impact on the environment perhaps affecting changes in water quality and impact species who rely upon the pristine conditions to thrive in balance. No fracking of park lands and the peoples land trusts. These resources are the people of the USA not for corporate ventures.

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Other private citizens opposed the BLM proposal as overly permissive. These commenters suggested that there should be no HVHF on federal lands. For example:

As a mother, a scientist, nature lover and business owner, I am against opening our public lands to the oil and gas industry. Hydraulic Fracturing has the potential, as we have seen, to contaminate water supplies and cause earthquakes. Also the nasty contaminated mud is hauled in open dump trucks in TX and has caused many problems including; spills on HWY’s, accidents, and illegal dumping of toxic materials. We must as a Country embrace renewable energy sources.

Some public commenters went further, suggesting HVHF should be banned everywhere and not just on BLM lands.

Similar to concerns expressed in the EPA drinking water study, most public comments from the general public focused on issues of habitat destruction and risk to drinking water from storing HVHF chemicals, as well as storing flowback and produced waters after well stimulation and before being either disposed of or moved for reuse off-site. Comments by the general public tended to be vague. The relatively few comments submitted by experts from industry, academia, and environmental group headquarters tended to be more specific and more in line with the concerns expressed by the RFF experts. In summary, the RFF risk matrix factors were again represented in public comments submitted to the

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189 Anonymous, Comment Letter on Proposed Rule for Oil and Gas: Well Stimulation, Including Hydraulic Fracturing, on Federal and Indian Lands, Docket No. BLM-2012-0001-5023 (June 26, 2012); see also Anonymous, Comment Letter on Proposed Rule for Oil and Gas: Well Stimulation, Including Hydraulic Fracturing, on Federal and Indian Lands, Docket No. BLM-2012-0001-5139 (June 26, 2012).

docket but again not with the uniformity expressed by the RFF experts, as depicted in Graph F below:

![Graph F](image)

G. Oil and Gas: Hydraulic Fracturing on Federal and Indian Lands (BLM-2013-0002)

After evaluating public comments, on May 24, 2013 BLM posted revisions to the rule BLM proposed a year earlier concerning regulations of HVHF on federal and Indian lands. According to BLM, key issues in the revised draft included: 1) the use of an expanded set of cement evaluation tools to ensure that usable water zones are properly isolated and protected from contamination and 2) more detailed guidance on handling of trade secrets claims modeled on Colorado procedures. The revised rule also specified opportunities for BLM to coordinate with states and tribes to reduce administrative costs and improve efficiency.

EPA reported that 1,348,563 comments were received concerning the second BLM proposal; of those, BLM posted 5,723 to the docket.

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192 Id.
193 Id.
194 Id.
195 Id. (comments entered to Docket No. BLM-2013-0002-0010).
difference between the numbers received and the number posted, amounting to 1,342,840 comments, was attributable to mass campaigns that sent letters with petitions or identical text. Again, most of the 5,723 comments posted to the document were submitted anonymously. Only 294 comments were signed. One hundred forty-one signed comments were attributable to two mass write-in campaigns conducted by the Natural Resources Defense Council (128 comments) and the National Parks Conservation Association (13 comments). About 3,015 anonymous comments posted in the docket appeared to be based on materials developed by the National Parks Conservation Association; all expressed concern about land conservation on federal land, including national parks. Two-thousand four-hundred forty-two comments asked BLM to “[p]rotect our national parks from fracking!” Two-thousand two-hundred forty-one commenters stated that they “want the rule to be amended to include the National Park Service (“NPS”) as a formal cooperating agency.”

Many anonymous comments posted to the docket do not appear to be submitted by an organized campaign, but most urge BLM to ban HVHF on public lands.\[196\] Many original public comments reflected fear and anger. For example, one commenter said, “[s]ome land should be left free of your noise and pollution. Some land should be left, some water should be left. Some things are worth more than money.”\[197\] Another wrote, “[s]top the raping of the land!”\[198\] Still another asserted that, “[f]racking is, by its very nature, destructive. We should not be ruining our land and water with this technique to gain energy.”\[199\]

The pattern of who commented on the second BLM docket was similar to that established in the first BLM docket, as depicted in Graph G1 below:


Environmental groups, however, were even more mobilized in the second BLM proposal governing regulation of HVHF on federal and Indian land. In addition to the mass campaigns, environmental groups and NGOs submitted 201 comments. Industry submitted only thirty-five comments. Although the number of environmental groups and NGOs submitting comments remained relatively static, the number of signatures garnered by the groups increased dramatically, from about 52,336 in the first BLM docket to about 1,343,041 in the second.

Although the RFF risk matrix factors could be found in comments submitted to the BLM docket, the general public again did not share the same rate of concern as the RFF experts. The vast majority of comments addressed concern about disruption to habitat and impaired drinking water, as depicted in Graph G2 below:
While the level of concern with the RFF risk factors was less evenly discussed in the BLM dockets than in the EPA drinking water study, a comparison to the two BLM dockets indicates similar concerns by the public between the first and second BLM proposals, as shown in Graph G3 below:
The number of comments discussing the RFF risk factors again coincided with the numbers of comments submitted to the docket by experts.

On March 26, 2015, BLM published its final rule.\(^{200}\) There were a number of key changes BLM made in response to the public notice and comment process.\(^{201}\) First, BLM expanded use of cement evaluation tools to protect usable water zones.\(^{202}\) Second, BLM established a requirement to demonstrate well integrity for all wells, rather than relying on the prior “type well” concept.\(^{203}\) Third, BLM set stringent requirements related to industry claims of trade secrets that would allow exemption from disclosure.\(^{204}\) Fourth, BLM set requirements to ensure that fluids recovered during HVHF operations are safely contained.\(^{205}\) Fifth, BLM created a regulation requiring disclosure and public availability of information about each HVHF operation on BLM land.\(^{206}\) Sixth, BLM revised federal records retention requirements to ensure that records of chemicals used in HVHF operations are kept for the life of the well.\(^{207}\) Finally, BLM changed the final rule to improve coordination on HVHF regulatory matters with states and tribes.\(^{208}\)

The BLM rule was immediately challenged in court, and on September 30, 2015, a federal trial court judge in the District of Wyoming issued an order granting a preliminary injunction preventing the application of the newly promulgated BLM rule until its legality is resolved.\(^{209}\)


\(^{201}\) Id.

\(^{202}\) Id.

\(^{203}\) Id.

\(^{204}\) Id.

\(^{205}\) Id.

\(^{206}\) Id.

\(^{207}\) Id.

\(^{208}\) Id.

H. Carriage of Conditionally Permitted Shale Gas Extraction Waste Water in Bulk

The final docket we examined involved a third federal agency: the U.S. Coast Guard (“USCG”), which is now part of the Department of Homeland Security.

On October 30, 2013, the USCG announced it would propose a policy letter about carrying shale gas extraction wastewater in bulk over American rivers by barge in a rulemaking titled Carriage of Conditionally Permitted Shale Gas Extraction Waste Water in Bulk.

The HVHF process produces a lot of waste. USCG was approached about the possibility of using barges to transport shale gas extraction wastewater (“SGEWW”) from northern Appalachia over inland navigable rivers to Ohio, Texas, and Louisiana. The transport of SGEWW was needed for storage, reprocessing for reuse, and final disposal. Ohio, Texas, and Louisiana had facilities to accommodate SGEWW not found in the portions of the Marcellus Shale with significant oil and gas development.

Barge owners indicated to the USCG that they were confused about what was needed to obtain a permit for SGEWW because “the specific chemical composition of SGEWW varies from one consignment load to another.” Barge owners knew that SGEWW accepted for shipping might contain one or more hazardous materials requiring a permit. The SGEWW wastes could include radioactive isotopes such as radium-226 and radium-228. SGEWW were difficult to permit because the wastes...

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213 Id. at 64,906 (Oct. 30, 2013). USCG defined transport shale gas extraction waste water (“SGEWW”) as follows: “SGEWW is a by-product of drilling for natural gas using unconventional hydraulic fracturing technology, which involves the injection of water, sand, and chemical additives. The sand remains in the well but a substantial portion of the injected fluid re-surfaces after the drilling and must be handled as SGEWW. At present, this SGEWW is either stored at the drilling site or transported by rail or truck to remote storage or reprocessing centers.”

214 Id. (“Pursuant to 46 CFR 153.900(a) and (c), under certain circumstances a bulk liquid hazardous material may be transported by a tank vessel if it is a “listed cargo” (listed in any of several specified tables in Coast Guard regulations”).

215 Id.

216 Hazardous materials are defined in 46 C.F.R. § 153.2 (2016); see also Carriage of Conditionally Permitted Shale Gas Extraction Waste Water in Bulk, 78 Fed. Reg. at 64,906.

are almost always different from shipment to shipment. Many variables affect the chemical composition of SGEWW shipments. Different chemicals may be used (but not necessarily disclosed) by different HVHF drillers and based on the different geology of each HVHF drill site (resulting in variable levels of NORM or TENORM and TDS). The USCG policy letter explained the conditions under which a barge owner could apply for a permit (called a “Certificate of Inspection” endorsement or letter) to transport SGEWW in bulk by river (such as the Ohio River).

A total of 1,071 comments were submitted to the USCG docket; all of which were posted on Regulations.gov. About 90 percent of comments (954) submitted were signed; only 10 percent comments (117) were submitted anonymously. The majority commented as private citizens (1,033 comments), but government (8 comments), industry (9 comments), academics (8 comments) and NGOs (17 comments) were represented. Of the comments received, almost 70 percent (710 comments) drafted original prose; 30 percent submitted comments based on language drafted from four different NGOs: Sierra Club (126 comments), Riverkeeper (158 comments), Kentucky Waterways Alliance (6 comments), and an unknown source (33 comments). The majority of the comments submitted to the USCG opposed the USCG proposal. Most did not want SGEWW waste shipped over rivers. In fact, our coding found only twenty-five comments in favor of the proposal. The typical public sentiment was similar to the following:

I am totally against allowing fracking wastewater to be transported on rivers. The world is already facing a water shortage in the future. The fracking industry should not be allowed to further risk poisoning rivers. It is already poisoning millions of gallons of water that can never again enter the water cycle on earth. Let’s conserve what we have left.

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218 Id. at 64,905–06.
219 Id. Even the age of the wells from which the waste came could affect exactly what is in the SGEWW.
Concern about accidents was a recurrent theme in public comments from individuals.\textsuperscript{223}

Public sentiments expressed to USCG echoed distrust of industry stated in comments made in earlier dockets established by EPA and the BLM on federal regulation of shale mineral extraction using HVHF. For example, an anonymous West Virginia resident said:

I, as a resident of WV, do not feel comfortable with the placement of such a facility. The statistics of fracking that have been made available are sketchy at best, but none are very favorable for said industry. The non-renewable energy sector have [sic] a stranglehold on this state. I would view a plant of this nature, especially in such close proximity to a water source, to be unacceptable.\textsuperscript{224}

Other comments made by the general public expressed anger at the federal government for allowing practices that might adversely impact public health and the environment.\textsuperscript{225} Numerous writers noted that “[b]etween 3–5 million people get their drinking water from the Ohio river”\textsuperscript{226} and, accordingly, expressed outrage that any practice could be allowed that might pollute a drinking water source for so many people.\textsuperscript{227} Some commenters writing about contamination to water from transport over rivers wanted further study.\textsuperscript{228}

Comments submitted to the USCG docket followed the pattern of earlier dockets. Discussion of RFF factors could be found in the docket,
but the numbers of detailed comments reflecting the consensus factors roughly equaled the number of experts that submitted comments. Public comments reflected the consensus concerns of the experts cited in the RFF study, but not with the uniformity of the RFF experts, as shown in Graph H below:

On February 23, 2016, USCG announced it withdrew the proposed policy and would instead keep the existing case-by-case determination in place pursuant to existing regulations. Although USCG had over 70,000 comments submitted mostly opposed to allowing shipping of fracking wastes by barge on U.S. rivers, the decision was at least in part due to lack of interest by industry. As such, USCG would not consider further change in regulations. Instead, USCG would “consider instituting a standardized process for transporting SGEWW in bulk after it has assessed whether current regulations are inadequate to handle requests for transport of SGEWW in bulk and environmental impacts that may be associated with SGEWW transport by barge.” USCG said it would

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230 Id.
231 Id.
“use experience with individual approvals of SGEWW barge transport to inform any future rulemaking or guidance on this subject.”232

V. COMPARISON OF HVHF DOCKETS

After calculating the percentage commenters addressed each issue in the RFF matrix for each docket, we created a consolidated graph for comparison (as depicted in Graph V below):

Combining the data across dockets shows clear trends in public concern. The bulk of the public’s comments reflected the concerns outlined by the experts in the RFF study, although the public did not seem well versed in the technical aspects of risk. Comments regarding the need to use vast quantities of water to undertake HVHF were the most prevalent theme across the dockets reviewed. Concerns about water pollution from storage of fracking fluids, flowback, and produced waters followed as the next-highest concerns. Most commenters addressing water pollution also raised concerns about pit and pond storage. Commenters also mentioned concern about water pollution from methane and from oil, but that was less common.

232 Id.
Damage to habitat was the third-most prevalent theme addressed in the dockets. Air pollution issues (both from methane and from polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons were a less common theme, likely because the dockets themselves were more focused on water issues than on air.

A striking pattern across all dockets was the fear the general public felt from exposure to dangerous chemicals. A second theme crossing dockets from the general public was a profound anger at lack of government protection from potential exposure to pollution.

Signed or not signed, most of the commenters had strong opinions. The vast majority of comments was written by individuals and favored federal action to protect drinking water—both by EPA and by BLM. An overwhelming majority of comment writers wanted EPA to promulgate regulations pursuant to TSCA requiring disclosure of chemicals and mixtures used in HVHF. Most opposed the USCG allowing the transport of the SGEWW wastes by barge over rivers of the United States, such as the Ohio or Hudson Rivers for fear of accidents and spills that may cause water pollution.

There was a clear discrepancy in details and citation between comments written by experts and those written by members of the general public. While the public rarely discussed the particulars the RFF experts cited as matters of concern, the vast majority wrote wanting greater environmental and health protections. Public sentiment on HVHF in federal dockets is summed up well in this anonymous comment:

> I am deeply concerned about the lack of transparency around the health and environmental impacts of chemicals used in hydraulic fracturing. The public has the right to know about the chemicals that are ending up in wildlife, our drinking water, lakes and rivers. Existing disclosure practices are not enough. Please use the full extent of your authority to require companies, especially manufacturers and processors, to report at least the identities and health effects of hydraulic fracturing chemicals and mixtures. Please then see that all relevant health and safety information is publicly disclosed so we know the risks we’re facing.233

VI. CONCLUSION

Advanced technologies that allow for the extraction of oil and gas from shale have transformed the way the world thinks about energy. The United States now has an abundance of fossil fuels that were once thought unusable. Debate over how and where to deploy technologies such as HVHF is vigorous and often covered in the media. Both state and federal

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governments face enormous pressure on how to balance the need for energy against the duty to protect public health, including the protection and preservation of the environment for future generations.

RFF developed a risk matrix of 264 “risk pathways” through a detailed survey of 215 experts in shale mineral extraction. From the larger list, RFF identified a consensus matrix of 12 key areas in which all agreed HVHF could pose a hazard. The consensus pathways involved risk to surface water quality, air quality, groundwater quality and habitat. Of particular concern were on-site pit and pond storage of produced and flowback waters, freshwater withdrawal for HVHF, venting methane, and treatment and disposal of flowback and produced waters. Accidents from cement and casing failures were uniformly deemed a danger to groundwater. NORM, aromatic hydrocarbons, hydrogen sulfide, oil and diesel were recognized as hazardous constituents of flowback and produced waters, drilling fluids and cuttings, and fracking fluids.

This article identified themes in public comments submitted to federal dockets in EPA, BLM, and USCG evaluating the need for further regulation of some segment of the shale mineral extraction industry. My analysis began by identifying who submitted comments: private individuals (both signed and as anonymous sources), government, NGOs, academics, and industry. In evaluating who submitted comments, I also considered whether the commenter drafted his or her own letter or was writing boilerplate language at the suggestion of an NGO or other entity. Where possible, the source of the boilerplate submission was identified and the numbers of writers using that form were provided.

I next identified key themes in the RFF consensus matrix and developed sixteen codes that reflected different levels of the RFF pathways. The sixteen codes were: stormwater, habitat, methane leakage, water usage, storage of fracking fluids, venting methane, on-site pit/pond storage of flowback and produced waters, treatment of shale mineral wastes by public treatment works, treatment of shale mineral wastes by industrial treatment plants, casing, cementing, NORM and TENORM, aromatic hydrocarbons, hydrogen sulfide, oil and diesel. Finally, after coding, I evaluated the overall position of the comment writer towards the proposed regulation: did the comment favor the proposed regulation, oppose the change to regulation, or, was the message mixed or was the comment unclear (or unresponsive to the regulation proposed and the avenue of queries requested by the federal agency posting the ANPR)?

The results were clear. In the dockets concerning federal regulation of shale mineral extraction identified as of January 2014, four dockets were the subject of massive letter writing campaigns by NGOs: EPA’s New Source Performance Standards, National Emission Standards for
Hazardous Air Pollutants, and Control Techniques Guidelines (252,744 comments); Hydraulic Fracturing Chemicals and Mixtures Under the Toxic Substances Control Act (264,597 comments); BLM’s 2012 proposals on Well Stimulation, Including Hydraulic Fracturing, on Federal and Indian Lands (59,786 comments); BLM’s 2013 proposal on Hydraulic Fracturing on Federal and Indian Lands (1,348,563 comments). The later BLM proposal had over six times the number of public comments submitted than did the prior year’s proposal.

All dockets had a significant number of experts opine on the respective proposal. Experts hailed from industry, NGOs, and government. In most instances, at least some academics were represented. In general, the experts went into greater detail about the proposed regulation and the risks the regulation did and did not address than did individual commenters. Experts were more likely to give a mixed response, identifying both positive and negative attributes to the regulatory proposal. Experts were also more likely to discuss the RFF risk factors.

Federal agency ability to address the volume of comments differed from agency to agency and evolved over time. Some agencies did a better job than others managing the efforts to group mass mailing campaigns together. Early dockets for agencies tended to have little or no screening. In certain early dockets, the mass write-in campaign were either published separately in the docket, as in EPA’s 2010 General Solicitation for Data Related to Hydraulic Fracturing (1,749 comments, all posted), or not published in the docket at all, as in USCG’s 2013 Carriage of Conditionally Permitted Shale Gas Extraction Waste Water in Bulk (1,071 comments posted, but 70,115 received).

As federal agencies began to address larger number of submissions, comments from mass campaigns began to be posted as a single copy. Grouping mass campaigns is an important development as it allows greater discussion and debate. Posting all comments separately makes public discourse more obscure as the mass campaigns may have the effect of drowning out discussion on finer points. Mass campaigns tended to be general in discussion, albeit passionate in point. Detailed comments with legal and scientific citation tended to be fewer in number. While the agencies have no difficulty finding these sophisticated submissions, the posting of mass campaigns makes it more difficult for the public to find and process the points of experts.

The ability to sort comments and separate out mass writing campaigns is an important development. Separating duplicative letters leads to better clarity on underlying themes, thus allowing better dialogue on the relative effectiveness of the underlying regulatory proposal. Including each instance of a mass campaign tends to drown out any other voices.
Including only one copy of the letter makes it easier for both the public and the evaluating agency to understand multiple concerns. Agencies could, however, do a better job of delineating how many instances each letter was duplicated. In most dockets, it is clear that many comments were part of a letter writing campaign, but it is not clear how many letters were submitted by each campaign.

With regard to the RFF risk matrix, when aggregating the data across dockets, the public clearly focused on certain consensus pathways the experts identified: potential risk to surface water quality, groundwater quality, habitat and, to a lesser extent, air quality, as depicted in Graph VI below:

The public recognized the danger of water contamination from storage of fracking fluids, flowback and produced waters. A large number also wrote about pit and pond storage. Some mentioned water contamination from methane and from oil, but air emissions (both from methane and from PAHs) were a less common theme (which is understandable, as the dockets studied were focused on water protection). Damage to habitat arose as an extremely prevalent theme throughout all dockets studied.

In short, while the general public did not go into an expert-level of detail about a regulatory mechanism, the concerns raised by the public in
comments to proposed rulemakings largely reflected the consensus themes of the experts. More significantly, the public writing overwhelmingly favored increased regulation to protect public health and the environment. Members of industry who were directly affected by the proposed regulations presented the very limited number of comments opposing increased regulation. Most of these industry objections were based on financial considerations and did not present evidence that adequate regulations were already in place to protect public health and the environment.