



WV group studying regional impact of fracturing

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A West Virginia-based environmental consulting group announced two new projects Jan. 21 looking at the controversial practice of shale gas development and the associated practice of hydraulic fracturing.

According to an e-mail from Downstream Strategies, the organization will take part in a study made possible by a grant from the Robert and Patricia Switzer Foundation to study the effects of fracturing in the eastern U.S.

Earthworks, an environmental advocacy group, will also join the study.

Hydraulic fracturing is a process used by natural gas companies to allow porous shale formation to more easily release natural gas into wells where it can be collected at the surface. Much of the water used in the process is returned to the surface where it must be treated, recycled or disposed.

"Researchers will develop a life cycle analysis of hydraulic fracturing waste water that can be used by local and state officials in their efforts to regulate drilling," Downstream Strategies wrote in its e-mail. "This life cycle analysis will assess the risks of environmental pollution and groundwater contamination from hydraulic fracturing."

The oil and gas industry has insisted that the process of hydraulic fracturing is safe. Various researchers have reached different conclusions about whether fracturing is safe, though most agree frac fluid can be harmful if accidentally spilled on the surface before or after it is returned.

The study will focus on analyzing the full life cycle of water that is used in the hydraulic fracturing project.

The project also proposed to examine emissions of greenhouse gases associated with drilling. While burning natural gas emits less carbon, questions have been raised about how much methane (a more potent greenhouse gas) is leaked in the drilling and transport of natural gas.

Downstream Strategies also announced a partnership with the West Virginia University Extension Service and the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition to "develop a new web-based application that links producers, consumers, distributors, and other major players in the West Virginia food system." The organization hopes to aid in the expansion of local food markets, creating jobs "while circulating wealth throughout local economies."

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