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New Independent Research Institute Launched to Probe Exposures and Potential Effects from Unconventional Oil and Gas Development
Expert panel releases reviews of current science to guide major national effort.

(Boston – September 12, 2019) The Health Effects Institute – an independent research Institute with a nearly 40 year track record of delivering trusted science on environment and health – has announced the launch of Health Effects Institute-Energy (HEI-Energy), a new Affiliate designed to provide high-quality and impartial science that answers questions about potential human exposure and health effects associated with onshore development of oil and natural gas from shale and other unconventional resources in the United States.

As a first step toward answering these important questions, HEI-Energy today released two companion reports by its Energy Research Committee – a systematic review of the current epidemiology literature on the health effects associated with onshore development of oil and natural gas from shale and other unconventional resources (UOGD) and a survey of the current studies of human exposure associated with UOGD.

The Committee’s review of the epidemiology literature focused on 25 studies that had the explicit objective of quantifying the relationship between human exposures and health outcomes. Among other findings, the Committee’s review found that many studies employed innovative methods and approaches designed to maximize the utility of the existing data, but noted that studies in this relatively early phase of research were limited by a lack of available data and direct measures of specific exposure to UOGD, which combined with other factors limited the Committee’s ability to determine whether exposures originating directly from UOGD contributed to assessed health outcomes.

Dr. George Hornberger, the Committee Chair noted “given the range of activities and chemicals to which populations surrounding UOGD activities may be exposed, it is critical that new high-quality research be undertaken to better understand the potential for human exposure to UOGD”.

Robert OKeefe, President of HEI-Energy noted that “HEI-Energy was established as an independent research institute to provide credible science to answer these challenging questions”.

To begin to fill those gaps, HEI-Energy also released today a companion report that surveyed existing studies that provide information about potential UOGD exposures. The report, released as a draft for public comment, is an important initial step to understand who might be exposed across different regions and how and when those exposures might occur.



Development of unconventional oil and gas has expanded rapidly across the United States in recent years, contributing to energy independence and employment but also raising important questions about potential exposures and health effects.

HEI-Energy, as an independent nonprofit affiliate of the Health Effects Institute (HEI), will use these findings to catalyze the launch of detailed studies across the US aimed at better understanding potential human exposures and health effects associated with onshore development of oil and natural gas from shale and other unconventional resources. With funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the oil and gas industry and a reputation for providing independent science and rigorous peer review, HEI-Energy has established an expert committee chaired by Dr. George Hornberger of Vanderbilt University and seven other national and international experts in air quality, biostatistics, epidemiology, exposure assessment, hydrology, medicine, petroleum engineering, risk assessment, and toxicology that will oversee all scientific activities.

Dr. Donna Vorhees, HEI-Energy CEO and Science Director observed: “The reports released today assessed the state of the current science on UOGD exposures and health effects and identified key outstanding questions that will set the stage for HEI-Energy to competitively select and launch population-level exposure research in multiple U.S. regions”.

HEI-Energy expects to provide science that is broadly useful to decision making by regulators, the oil and natural gas industry, environmental organizations, public health experts, communities, and other stakeholders.

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