



Comments of Nichole Saunders, Environmental Defense Fund to the USEPA Science Advisory Board Hydraulic Fracturing Research Advisory Panel

March 7, 2016

Re: Assessment of the Potential Impacts of Hydraulic Fracturing for Oil and Gas on Drinking Water Resources

SAB Panelists:

The Environmental Defense Fund thanks you for the continued opportunity to participate in this review process.

EDF supports this Panel's currently drafted response questioning the clarity and support for major findings of this Assessment, and also supports this Panel's recent efforts to distinguish between necessary changes to the text of *this* report and recommendations for follow-on activities to address this report's gaps and research needs.

Prioritization of key recommendations will improve the Assessment, support its timely finalization, and highlight necessary areas of focus for the future. EDF would encourage this Panel to take steps to further streamline its final review by more clearly distinguishing between near term and long term recommendations to aid EPA in its response and finalization.

Regarding the Major Findings, EDF is encouraged to see SAB's continued concern regarding the "clarity, adequacy of support" for a number of major findings presented in the report, specifically the statement by EPA in the Executive Summary that the Agency "*did not find evidence* that these mechanisms have led to widespread, systemic impacts on drinking water resources in the United States." EDF agrees with this Panel that this statement as drafted is "ambiguous and appears inconsistent with the observations, data, and levels of uncertainty presented and discussed in the body of the draft Assessment Report."

EDF appreciates this Panel's recognition of the diverse interpretations of the headline statement regarding widespread, systemic impacts. EDF would, however, highlight for this Panel that members of the Public have not been alone in our varied interpretations of this language and its meaning. EPA itself – the author of the Report – has presented its own statement in conflicting ways:

From the June 2015 Press Release: "**Assessment shows** hydraulic fracturing activities have not led to widespread, systemic impacts ..."

From the December 2015 Department of Energy Report to Congress on the Multiagency Collaboration on Unconventional Oil and Gas Research: “Based on available scientific data, EPA **found that** hydraulic fracturing activities in the United States **are carried out in a way that has not led to** widespread, systematic impacts on drinking water resources.”

EDF recognizes that EPA has gone on in these various documents to recognize limitations and uncertainties associated with this finding. For example, in the DOE report, two sentences later the Agency notes that “[t]his could reflect either a rarity of impacts on drinking water resources **or an underestimate of impacts as a result of data limitations.**”

Can you blame the public for not understanding exactly what this message means if the Agency itself isn’t even sure? What is the utility of such an ambiguous statement, factually accurate or not, if when taken out of context it causes more uncertainty than clarity?

The data limitations and uncertainties EPA goes on to highlight are very real, as are local impacts that may not be considered widespread or systemic. They should not be so easily lost in the dialogue.

This Assessment is important – it is not the place for clever word play or ambiguity. It is vital that EPA accurately represent the full scope of work in a way that cannot be misappropriated or interpreted, and also in a way that is clear, meaningful, and informative.

EDF respectfully urges the SAB to retain their requests for more clarity in their final review.

Sincerely,

Nichole Saunders
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Environmental Defense Fund