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Institute's Gas Drilling Report Leads to Claims of Bias and Concern for a University's Image

By MIREYA NAVARRO

A report from a new institute at the State University at Buffalo asserting that state oversight has made natural gas drilling safer is causing tumult on campus and beyond, with critics arguing that the institute is biased toward industry and could undercut the university's reputation.

The study, issued on May 15, said that state regulation in Pennsylvania had made drilling there far safer and that New York rules were even more likely to ensure safety once drilling gets under way in the state.

But a government watchdog group quickly raised questions about the study's data and the authors' ties to the oil and gas industry. And a newly formed group of professors and students is calling for a broader inquiry into the genesis of the institute, which issued the report only weeks after its creation was announced in April.

"This report reflects the interests of the gas companies, not scholarship," said Jim Holstun, a professor of English and one of around 20 members of the newly formed University at Buffalo Coalition for Leading Ethically in Academic Research, which met for the first time Wednesday night. "We look very bad."

The controversy at the university, a major research center with the biggest enrollment in the State University of New York system with 28,600 students, taps into widespread concerns in academia about the growing influence of corporate money in research as government grants decline. The drilling research arm, the Shale Resources and Society Institute, is seeking to raise \$1.14 million in start-up money over the next three years from the oil and gas industry and other sources, according to the university and the institute's Web site.

University officials, who say they will respond to the criticisms raised, said the institute was to bring academic rigor to the hot-button issue of horizontal drilling and fracturing, or hydrofracking, which involves pumping large volumes of chemicals into shale under high pressure to extract gas.



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The drilling process has roiled communities in Pennsylvania since it began in full there in 2008, with many residents complaining about air pollution and threats to groundwater aquifers. It has also proved divisive in New York, where the administration of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo is finalizing proposed regulations to allow drilling upstate.

E. Bruce Pitman, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University at Buffalo, said in an interview that the idea for the institute came out of a series of seminars on hydrofracking issues held by the geology department last year that pointed up the need for a forum “for the exchange of ideas and debate.” The institute as a whole has yet to receive financial support from the industry, Dr. Pitman said, and its start-up budget — about \$40,000 — came from the college’s discretionary funds.

In their report, the shale institute’s researchers said they examined violations by Marcellus Shale drillers in Pennsylvania from January 2008 to August 2011. It said that the incidence of major “polluting environmental events” related to hydrofracking — like contamination of local water supplies and spills — declined by more than half in three years, “a rather notable indicator of improvement by the industry and oversight by the regulators.”

The report added that under New York’s proposed rules, which are more stringent, any problems “could have been either entirely avoided or mitigated.”

But in a searing critique issued nine days later, the Public Accountability Initiative, a local watchdog group, questioned the study’s claims, saying the rate of major violations had actually gone up. The group also took some of the authors to task for copying entire passages from a report they wrote last year for the conservative Manhattan Institute, without proper attribution.

“What happens is that the first study gets published, and that study is cited by other studies that come out,” said Kevin Connor, the co-director of the Public Accountability Initiative. “U.B. just put its label on it.”

He said the material gained the stature of academic research once released by the University at Buffalo. A university news release accompanying the report even described it as “peer-reviewed” — words that were later retracted by the university.

The authors’ ties to the oil and gas industry also were not fully disclosed, said the accountability group, which focuses on corporate and government corruption. The two lead authors, Timothy J. Considine, an economist at the University of Wyoming, and Robert W. Watson, an associate professor emeritus of engineering at Pennsylvania State University, conduct research for industry.

Neither Dr. Considine nor Dr. Watson returned calls or responded to e-mails. The third author, the shale institute's co-director, John P. Martin, who does planning and public relations work for the industry through JPMartin Energy Strategy in Saratoga Springs, declined to be interviewed through a University at Buffalo spokesman.

The fourth author was Dr. Considine's son Nicholas, identified in the report as being affiliated with the University of Wyoming's Center for Energy Economics and Public Policy, which is led by his father.

The Marcellus Shale Coalition, a trade group of oil and gas companies, finances studies by Dr. Considine and Dr. Watson on the economic impacts of natural gas development.

Kathryn Klaber, the coalition's president, said that the researchers were chosen because of their experience, and that the purpose of the research was to advance the "technological and economic understanding that's going to get us to the next level in shale gas development."

Like other industries, oil and gas companies routinely support energy, geology and engineering research to harness scientific expertise, to advance technology and to groom a work force they can draw from in the future. Consulting work by researchers is also common.

Energy programs like the School of Energy Resources where Dr. Considine teaches at the University of Wyoming show the logos of partnering oil and gas companies on their Web sites. So does a different SUNY shale research institute, founded in 2009 on the Fredonia campus and led by Gary Lash, another prominent researcher with his own consulting firm.

"When a corporation gives you a gift, you want to say thank you," said Michael R. Barone, a spokesman for SUNY Fredonia.

Some experts on the ethics of research say that only peer-reviewed research published in independent journals should be taken seriously. Any corporate ties, they add, must be fully disclosed.

"The thing that's really hanging over all this is that when companies fund research, the companies attempt to borrow the prestige of the university," said Thomas O. McGarity, a law professor at the University of Texas at Austin and a board member at the Center for Progressive Reform. "Universities have to be absolutely transparent."

