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Natural Gas Fracking Industry May Be Paying Off Scientists

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Authors of pro-fracking studies are coming under fire for their cozy relationships with the fossil fuel industry. Image: Climate Desk

Last week the University of Texas provost announced he would re-examine a report by a UT professor that said fracking was safe for groundwater after the revelation that the professor

pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars from a Texas natural gas developer. It's the latest fusillade in the ongoing battle over the basic facts of fracking in America.



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Texans aren't the only ones having their fracking conversations shaped by industry-funded research. Ohioans got their first taste last week of the latest public-relations campaign by the energy policy wing of the US Chamber of Commerce. It's called "Shale Works for US," and it aims to spend millions on advertising and public events to sell Ohioans on the idea that fracking is a surefire way to yank the state out of recession.

The campaign is loaded with rosy employment statistics, which trace to an April report authored by professors at three major Ohio universities and funded by, you guessed it, the natural gas industry. The report paints a bright future for fracking in Ohio as a job-creator.

One co-author of the study, Robert Chase, is poised at such a high-traffic crossroads of that state's natural gas universe that his case was recently taken up by the Ohio Ethics Commission, whose chairman called him "more than a passing participant in the operations of the Ohio oil and gas industry," and questioned his potential conflicts of interest. As landowners in a suite of natural gas-rich states like Texas and Ohio struggle to decipher conflicting reports about the safety of fracking, Chase is a piece in what environmental and academic watchdogs call a growing puzzle of industry-funded fracking research with poor disclosure and dubious objectivity.

"It's hard to find someone who's truly independent and doesn't have at least one iron in the fire," said Ohio oil and gas lease attorney Mark F. Okey. "It's a good ol' boys network and they like to take care of their own."

Chase got his petroleum engineering PhD from Penn State. In 2009, long after Chase left the university, it came under fire for a fracking report, widely cited by state politicians as evidence for opening up the fracking market, which an in-house investigator said "crossed the line between policy analysis and policy advocacy." Early in his career, Chase worked as a consultant for many of the nation's biggest oil and gas developers, including Halliburton, Cabot, and EQT. In 1978 he began teaching petroleum engineering at Marietta College, the small Ohio liberal arts school where he remains on faculty today. In 2008, Ohio's then-governor Ted Strickland appointed him to the Ohio Oil & Gas Commission, an independent judiciary board that hears complaints from landowners and developers against the state's Division of Mineral Resources Management. And last year, he founded his own consultancy, Chaseland LLC, that helps connect landowners with gas companies seeking drilling rights, for which Chase collects a commission. In February, Chase gave glowing testimony to Congress on the benefits of fracking, and included a swipe at anti-fracking advocates by citing the very same study now being investigated at the University of Texas. In recent years, Chase has taken his pro-fracking stance to the pages of Ohio newspapers to call for increased fracking and to assure locals of its safety; his latest column was soundly rebutted by a pair of Cincinnati geologists, who wrote that Chase had made "several misleading assertions." State officials tightened fracking regulations after a series of earthquakes in northeastern Ohio, including a 4.0 quake in Youngstown on New Year's Eve.

The founding of Chaseland was a bit too much for Oil & Gas Commission director Linda Osterman, who in February asked the state ethics board to investigate Chase; they ruled that he would have to recuse himself from any Commission hearings involving companies or people he had worked with at Chaseland. Chase has only had to sit out once, Osterman told *Climate Desk*, on the Commission's most recent hearing, in which a local cattle farm disputed a permit given to Chesapeake Energy to drill on the farm's land, because he had consulted with Chesapeake. Otherwise, Osterman said, "I've never had any concerns about his ability to be impartial." Still, Osterman was concerned enough to initiate the ethics inquiry.

In an interview, Chase said his wide network made him uniquely suited to put the pieces together for his most recent economic impact study. "It's very cut and dry," he said. "If you don't have someone who really has the experience, then it doesn't make sense to do the study." The

study's other authors were economists and business professors.

David Brown, a member of Marietta's Faculty Council, defended his colleague, saying that the fracking study's funding source "should not by itself call into question his research," and that Chase letting his varied roles compromise his academic research "is not something I would expect from him."

But Jack Shaner of the Ohio Environmental Council expressed a different take.

"There's a clear and present danger of industry and university being way too cozy. [Chase] is clearly a poster child for the need for a clear bright line between industry and academia." A staff attorney for OEC called for Chase to step down from his seat on the Commission.

Indeed, Chase isn't the only professor who has come under fire for not disclosing proximity to the natural gas industry. Two more recent examples:

Timothy Considine, another Penn State grad who's now an economist at the University of Wyoming, was the lead author on a SUNY-Buffalo report in May that claimed state regulation had made fracking safe in Pennsylvania. Within days, a top Pennsylvania environmental official quoted the Buffalo study in testimony to Congress about the effectiveness of fracking regulations. But both the official and the study itself declined to mention that Considine's close ties to the industry—and that his department had received nearly \$6 million in donations from the oil and gas industry last year. Considine—whom one Pennsylvania newspaper called "the shale gas industry's go-to professor"—also helped write the controversial 2009 Penn State study and a 2010 expansion of it that was funded by the American Petroleum Institute.

In February a University of Texas professor and former head of the US Geological Survey, Charles G. Groat, penned a study that found no evidence of groundwater contamination from fracking; the study didn't disclose Groat's seat on the board of major Texas fracker Plains Exploration & Production Company, for which he was reportedly paid \$400,000 in 2011—more than double his university salary. The director of Groat's UT program told Bloomberg News he had "no idea" of Groat's connection to Plains, but last Tuesday the University of Texas provost said in response to mounting concern that he would convene a panel to re-examine Groat's findings.

Of course, industry funding of research has been commonplace since at least the heyday of Big Tobacco, and is still *de rigueur* for pharmaceuticals, among others. But Thomas McGarity, a UT-Austin law professor whose research on industry money in university research led him to write the book *Bending Science: How Special Interests Corrupt Public Health Research*, said it's almost impossible to imagine a bias-free study with industry cash behind it.

"They're trying to buy the prestige of the university," he said. "And the universities are happy to sell their prestige, I suppose."