Rebuttal to misinformation about hydraulic fracturing

To the Editor:

Over the past several weeks, the oil and gas industry has made numerous inaccurate claims about hydraulic fracturing in Medina County. Last week, the Post printed a front page article covering the OOGEE’s and Rhonda Reda’s presentation promoting public awareness about the safety of gas drilling. In this rebuttal, I intend to respond to Reda’s three main arguments: the industry is subject to environmental regulations, industry geologists have not documented water contamination, and water contamination is the result of naturally occurring methane. I encourage all citizens to research and validate my claims.

On environmental exemptions: Reda and OOGEE claim that hydraulic fracturing and its associated drilling operations are not exempt from environmental regulations. While some regulations exist under the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act, The Energy Policy Act of 2005 reduced energy regulations under the Safe Drinking Water Act, which allows the EPA to regulate “underground injection.” [Title III - Oil and Gas, Subtitle C - Production, Section 322 - Hydraulic fracturing] amends paragraph 1 of Section 1421(d) of the Safe Drinking Water Act to exclude “hydraulic fracturing operations” from the EPA’s definition of “underground injection.” Opponents of hydraulic fracturing have cited this as an example of inadequate regulation because no regulations exist for drinking water contamination, specifically.

On documented cases: Because no agency can regulate hydraulic fracturing’s water contamination under the Safe Drinking Water Act and industry tests are naturally biased, the only large scale tests of water contamination have been done by university researchers. Together, these studies document hundreds of major cases (requiring hazard mitigation) of drinking water contamination in eight states. The 2004 EPA study on hydraulic fracturing is often used to avoid arguments about water contamination. In it, the EPA documented no cases of contamination; but later documents revealed that the EPA colluded with industry to dismiss all previous cases of water contamination from the study.

On naturally occurring methane: This argument purports that methane in well water occurs naturally in areas where hydraulic fracturing is occurring. The study, “Methane contamination of drinking water accompanying gas-well drilling and hydraulic fracturing”, Osborn et al. Nicholas School of the Environment - Duke University, sampled water from wells near where hydraulic fracturing was and was not occurring. It draws a direct correlation between the distance from the drilling operation and methane concentration in the water. Of the active extraction areas, nearly all had water samples with methane concentrations above the “Action Level for Hazard Mitigation”. By measuring the degree of carbon isotopes in the methane, Osborn showed that methane in the water samples matched methane from the gas wells exactly and was not related at all to naturally occurring methane. This results in a causal link between the drilling and water contamination. The methodology corrected for error by taking samples from geologically identical areas.

I believe that I have accurately responded to the major industry claims and encourage citizens to fact-check them for themselves before making major decisions, especially leasing land for hydraulic fracturing.