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## EPA Tells Railroad Commission that Fracking Is Causing Earthquakes in North Texas

Tuesday, August 23, 2016

Posted By [Mark Reagan](#) on Tue, Aug 23, 2016 at 8:30 AM



Hannah Hamilton | USGS  
A fluid impoundment containing produced waters at a hydraulic fracturing drilling operation in the Permian Basin of West Texas.

The Environmental Protection Agency has finally admitted that fracking can cause earthquakes.

In an August 15 letter to the Railroad Commission of Texas, EPA Water Division Director William K. Honker tells the agency that it's concerned with the amount of earthquake activity in North Texas because of its potential impact on public health and the environment, including underground drinking water sources. Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, is a method of drilling for oil and natural gas that shoots water, chemicals and sand at high pressure into cracks in the earth to extract the natural resources.

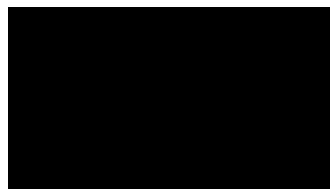
Honker singles out three areas around the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area where the Railroad Commission of Texas actually shut down or reduced the injection volume of fracking wells. "Seismic activity in these three areas substantially diminished in frequency and magnitude; however, earthquake events continue in other areas of North Texas, most notably, frequent events in and near the city of Irving in Dallas County," the letter, which was **first obtained by the Texas Tribune**, states. According to [Earthquake Track](#), a website that compiles United States

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Geological Services data, there have been 82 earthquakes in Texas in the past year. The data does not delineate between natural and induced seismic activity.

The EPA also took a shot at the Railroad Commission by accusing the agency of publicly denying that scientific data links earthquakes to fracking. In its response to the EPA, a Railroad Commission official said that a statement responding to a [University of Texas and Southern Methodist University study](#) found that links between fracking and earthquakes in North Texas was taken out of context and misleading. Earlier this year, Railroad Commission spokeswoman Gaye Greever McElwain [told Scientific American](#) that a September 2015 commission ruling that several well operators were not contributing to seismic activity was "based on scientific data and evidence" that "determined the operators were not contributing to seismic activity." She was referring to several specific cases, not speaking generally.

In a statement provided to us today, McElwain says the commission "takes the issue of induced seismicity very seriously and has in place some of the most stringent rules." However, McElwain's statement is not as blunt as the EPA's assertion that fracking can cause earthquake activity, saying that special rules were implemented on November 17, 2014 to monitor wells in areas that *historically* have seismic activity. "As of July 1, 2016, the Railroad Commission has received 56 disposal well applications in areas of historic seismicity. Of these, 28 permits have been issued with special conditions, such as requirements to reduce maximum daily injection volumes and pressure and/or to record volumes and pressures daily as opposed to monthly," McElwain said. "Eleven applications were returned or withdrawn. Three applications were protested and sent to hearing. Ten permits were issued without special conditions, and four applications are pending."

She also points out that the Railroad Commission is looking forward to the full implementation of the TexNet program. In 2015, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott authorized roughly \$4.5 million in funding for the TexNet Seismic Monitoring Program, an initiative led by the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas at Austin, which will gather information about seismic activity in the state and then analyze that data "so we all may gain a better understanding of seismicity in Texas," McElwain said. "The Commission has also conducted or participated in a number of public and technical hearings regarding instances of alleged induced seismicity."

But it's a big deal that the EPA didn't mince words: fracking causes earthquakes. Jim Bradbury, an oil and gas attorney based in Fort Worth, tells the Tribune that he cannot recall the EPA ever explicitly tying Texas seismic activity to fracking operations in the state. "It's a big deal that they said that," he told a reporter from the Tribune. According to Bradbury, the EPA can take away the Railroad Commission's authority over fracking wells and that is not a good signal for the state agency. "It is obvious to everyone that [the Railroad Commission] is intentionally avoiding the reality that the larger scientific community has embraced and is working on," he said. "I think it reveals that EPA is troubled by that reality."

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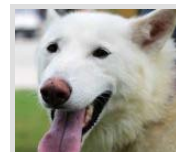
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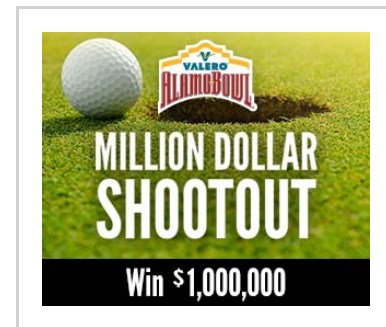
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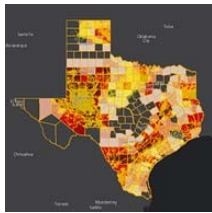


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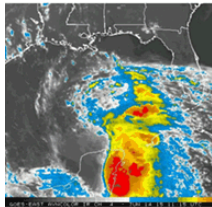
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