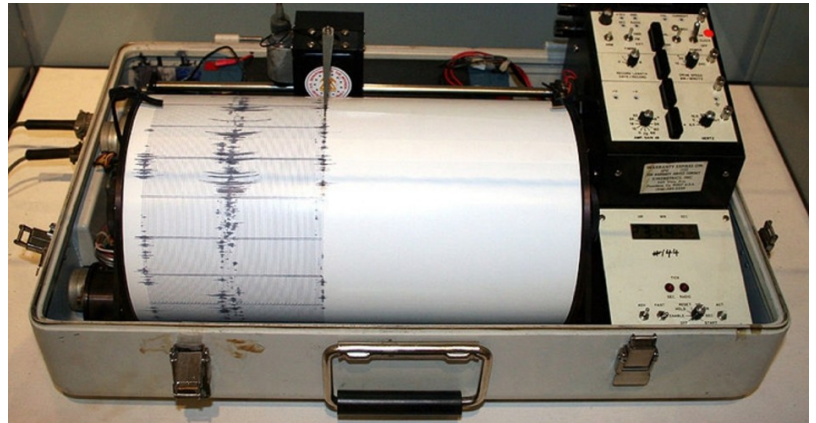




Are Earthquakes in Texas Caused by Fracking?

Seismologists from Southern Methodist University in Dallas and the U.S. Geological Survey [released a “preliminary” report last Friday](#) that a series of minor earthquakes could be explained away as simply anomalies relating to a geological formation they just discovered. This report, however, gave renewed hope to anti-frackers that the earthquakes were caused by fracking activities in the Barnett Shale formation underneath Dallas and the suburb of Irving.



Brian Stump, one of the SMU seismologists, made it clear that any connection to fracking was premature: “This is a first step ... in investigating the cause of the earthquakes. Now that we know the fault’s location and depth, we can begin studying how this fault moves.”

The report did acknowledge that the fault lies underneath natural gas fracking wells, but that they have been inactive for three years. Because the seismologists are just beginning their study of the fault, no connection to fracking, past or present, can be made. The report stated, “SMU scientists continue to explore all possible natural and anthropogenic [human] causes ... and do not have a conclusion at this time.”

Anti-frackers have been trying to drum up concern about alleged fracking-caused earthquakes for years, but have been hard-pressed to do much more than speculate in the face of a lack of hard evidence of any connection. For example, Jeff Carlton, an AP writer in an undated attack on fracking published at ABC News, noted that Cleburne, Texas, had its first recorded earthquake on June 2, 2009, but claimed that it won’t be its last. Near Cleburne, with a population of 30,000, there are more than 200 natural-gas drilling sites using fracking technology dating back to 2001. Then the town experienced four small quakes in 2009, and so the connection is obvious, at least according to the mayor: “We haven’t had a quake in recorded history, and all of a sudden you drill and there are earthquakes.”

This reasoning is known as *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* — the error in logic that posits that since event Y followed event X, event Y must have been caused by event X. In his article, Carlton admitted that he was pushing the credibility envelope:

There is no consensus among scientists about whether the practice [of fracking] is contributing to the quakes. But such seismic activity was once rare in Texas and seems to be increasing lately.

Buried in his article was a voice of reason, however, from Julie Wilson of Chesapeake Energy, which owns most of the mineral rights in and near Cleburne:

Drilling has occurred for more than a hundred years. Tens of thousands of wells have been drilled with no nearby earthquakes at all.... Hundreds of earthquakes have occurred with no drilling nearby!

Deirdre Fulton, writing for Common Dreams, a self-proclaimed progressive news outlet, didn’t let doubts enter her musings about earthquakes and fracking, claiming boldly back in October that “fracking triggered hundreds of small earthquakes along a previously unmapped fault in eastern Ohio.”



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on February 10, 2015

She backed up her claim with this from the Associated Press: “The quakes ... tended to coincide with nearby [fracking] activity ... but *none of the quakes was reported felt by people.*” (Emphasis added.)

She then quotes, as authoritative, a statement published by LiveScience, a small website owned by an online website publisher Purch, that “fracking activated a small, unknown fault. The fracking water could have ‘greased’ the fault, unclamping the structure and allowing it to slip.”

A month later Fulton came on even stronger, claiming that “scientists in Ohio were able to make direct connections between at least 400 small ‘micro-earthquakes’ and nearby fracking operations.” She claimed that waste water from the fracking operations was “a likely contributing factor to the increase in earthquakes in Oklahoma.”

Assuming for the moment that there is a direct connection, just how powerful are the fracking-related earthquakes, and should people experiencing them be concerned?

First of all, most people don’t even know about them, their impact is so small. Fulton said that Irving, Texas, experienced five earthquakes in four days back in November, ranging from 2.2 on the Richter scale to 3.3. What does that mean?

Based on documentation from the U.S. Geological Survey, earthquakes of less than 2.0 magnitude occur “several million times” per year and cannot be felt by people experiencing them. Quakes registering between 2.0 to 2.9 “may be felt by some people” but with “no damage to buildings.” These occur, according to the USGS, “over a million times a year.” It’s only when quakes register 3.0 on the Richter scale or higher that people might begin to notice. These occur more than 100,000 times a year, and indoor objects might shake during the quake.

Perhaps the person reaching the farthest for conclusions not yet proven is one James Joiner, a writer and photographer for the left-wing Daily Beast online. Unencumbered with concerns about accuracy, Joiner wrote in January that 11 earthquakes near Irving, Texas, “might be the fracking industry’s nightmare.” Just his description of the process alerts readers to his worldview:

Irving itself has more than 2,000 of these sites nearby, and some of the more than 216,000 state wide “injection wells” responsible for disposing of fracking’s wastewater byproduct are in close proximity.

These wells hold millions of gallons of chemically tainted H2O....

As the people of Irving are now discovering, all of this poking and prodding is not without potential consequences.

For proof for those who want to check his sources, Joiner provided a link to the *Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America* (BSSA), which, unfortunately, turns out to be a subscription site so his facts cannot be verified. He then refers to another township in Canada that also “has the oil addiction shakes” with a link that is three years old!

National Public Radio is used by Joiner as another source for his rant, claiming that “as injection activity continues, so will the seismic hazard.” One checking the accuracy of the quote will learn that the link is blocked, making it also impossible to verify Joiner’s conclusions.

To be fair, Joiner finally backs off near the end of his screed, writing that “there’s no 100-percent definitive scientific connection between this swarm of earthquakes and fracking activity,” but by that time his credibility is impaired.



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Anti-frackers seizing on anything to damage the credibility of fracking and trying to link the activity to earthquakes continue to fail once a close look at the data has been completed. Naturally, drillers are keenly interested in any possible links between their efforts and earthquakes from a public relations standpoint. Said Todd Staples, president of the Texas Oil and Gas Association, "The oil and natural gas industry agrees that recent seismic activity warrants robust investigation into the connection between hydraulic fracking and earthquakes."

Rants and wishful thinking by anti-frackers, however, do little to advance their cause. Wanting to make the connection is far different from proving it.

Photo of a seismograph: U.S. Department of the Interior

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