

DOE PANEL URGES NEW SAFEGUARDS FOR FRACKING

DOE panel urges new safeguards for fracking By Edward Felker
An Energy Department advisory panel on Thursday proposed short-term steps to address risks from hydraulic fracturing, but stopped short of calling for a halt to the practice that has prompted a boom in shale gas production and some environmental fears. The seven-member Secretary of Energy Advisory Board Natural Gas Subcommittee, in a report on its initial 90-day review, said immediate actions are needed to better understand the risks from fracturing, or fracking, and more information needs to be made available to the public. The steps include the full disclosure of fracturing chemicals to the public, stronger industry standards, better data sharing between federal and state regulators and increased air pollution monitoring, the panel said.

The findings fall far short of the demands from environmental and health groups seeking a federal moratorium until hydraulic fracturing is shown to be safe. The panel called for “effective and capable” regulation, funded by fees on drillers, but stressed that more specific recommendations about the roles of federal and state regulators were beyond the scope of the 90-day review. John Deutch, a former CIA director and former Energy Department under secretary who chairs the subcommittee, said in a statement that the natural gas industry and regulators need to embrace transparency and best practices. “As shale gas grows and becomes an increasingly important part of our nation’s energy supply, it is crucial to bring a better understanding of the environmental impacts, both current and potential, and ensure that they are properly addressed,” he said. Deutch added, “The current output of shale gas and its potential for future growth emphasize the need to assure that this supply is produced in an environmentally sound fashion, and in a way that meets the needs of public trust.” Specifically, the subcommittee said that it agreed with the view that the chances are remote that fracturing fluids will contaminate drinking water when there is a large geologic separation.

Still, it said there was “no economic or technical reason to prevent public disclosure of all chemicals used in fracturing fluids.”Further, the report rejected arguments made by industry, and repeated by its backers in Congress, that the practice should be accepted because it has been used by the industry since the 1940s.“An industry response that hydraulic fracturing has been performed safely for decades rather than engaging the range of issues concerning the public will not succeed,” the subcommittee warned.

The 41–page report is open to public comment through next Monday, and is to be discussed by the full committee at a public meeting that day and sent to Energy Secretary Steven Chu by Aug. 18.DOE spokesman Tom Reynolds said Chu will review the report when it is final.“As the (Obama) administration has said, natural shale gas will continue to be an important part of our nation’s energy portfolio, but we must we take steps to ensure production proceeds in a safe and responsible manner,” he added.The subcommittee is to continue working on recommendations to federal agencies to ensure environmental protection and public health, which are due to be reviewed by the full committee and finalized by Nov. 18.Erik Milito, director of upstream operations at the American Petroleum Institute, said in advance of the report on Wednesday that recommendations from the department should recognize that shale gas development “is already well regulated and safe,” and that it will create jobs, government revenue and energy security.“Americans have a unique opportunity to take control of their energy future by encouraging domestic development of our vast shale energy resources,” he said.