

EPA STATEMENT REGARDING RESEARCH PROGRAMME ON UNCONVENTIONAL GAS EXPLORATION AND EXTRACTION (28/10/2016)

In late 2011 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was requested by Mr. Pat Rabbitte, former Minister for Communication, Energy and Natural Resources, to commission and coordinate the management of research in relation to the environmental impacts of Unconventional Gas Exploration & Extraction (UGEE).

Following this request, the EPA established a Steering Committee of relevant stakeholders and held a detailed public consultation in 2013 to inform the terms of reference for such a Research Programme. Funding for the research programme was committed by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, DCCAE (formerly DCENR and the Environment Division of the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG)) and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Following an Open Tender Competition in late 2013, six tenders were received by the EPA. In August 2014, the contract to carry out the research was awarded to a consortium led by CDM Smith Ireland Limited, following the tender evaluation.

The research programme was designed to produce outputs that will assist regulators – both North and South - in fulfilling their statutory roles regarding impact assessment and regulation of any potential UGEE operations in Ireland. The two key questions posed for the research programme were

- 1 Can UGEE projects/operations be carried out in the island of Ireland whilst also protecting the environment and human health?
2. What is 'best environmental practice' in relation to UGEE projects/operations?

The research, intended to be completed in two overlapping phases, involves extensive desk-based work (literature review and assessment) by technical experts (Phase 1), as well as baseline-monitoring of seismicity and water resources (Phase 2).

The desk-based work (Phase 1) has now been substantially completed. In January 2016, the EPA was requested by DCENR to pause the next Phase of the research to allow time to review the multiple outputs of Phase 1. Following consideration of this request by the project Steering Committee, the Steering Committee has agreed to complete Phase 1 of the study before any decision is made about future work.

An integrated report will now be prepared and published along with recommendations for any additional research considered appropriate to address the two key questions posed for the study. The integrated report and the other research outputs from Phase 1 (11 reports in total) will further the understanding of the potential impacts on the environment and human health from UGEE projects and operations, including construction, operation and aftercare and, as stated in the Government's White Paper on Energy, will help inform policy in this area but in the context of the objective of achieving a low carbon energy system in which the use of oil and gas is gradually curtailed and, in the longer term, is eliminated from our energy mix. All the Final technical & Summary Reports and the Integrated Report will be made publicly available on the EPA website, once Phase 1 reporting is complete later this year. The reports are now in their final stages of preparation and will be published before the end of the year.

The EPA also notes the recent passing of a bill on 27th October 2016 by Dail Eireann to provide for the prohibition of the exploration and extraction of petroleum from shale rock, tight sands and coal seams in the Irish onshore and Ireland's internal waters. The EPA will continue to provide the necessary scientific and technical support through its research, monitoring and assessment activities

to facilitate the policy discussions and decisions about this and the wider issues around the transition to a low carbon economy and society.

NOTE TO EDITOR

The UGEE Joint Research Programme is managed by a steering committee comprising the Environmental Protection Agency, representatives from Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, DCCA (formerly DCENR and the Environment Division of the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG)); the Geological Survey of Ireland; Commission for Energy Regulation; An Bord Pleanála; Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland and the Health Services Executive.

The research involves five distinct projects:

1. Groundwater, Surface Water & Associated Ecosystems;
2. Seismicity
3. Air quality;
4. UGEE Projects/operations: Impacts & Mitigation Measures; and
5. Regulatory Framework for Environmental Protection.