

Panelists discuss precautions to take in natural gas industry

By Chanelle Gibson

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“Natural gas production is harmful to the environment because it contributes to methane emissions from drilling leakage,” Colin Leyden, senior manager of State Regulatory & Legislative Affairs for Natural Gas at the Environmental Defense Fund, said in Tuesday’s panel for UT Energy Week.

According to Leyden, the Environmental Defense Fund is in favor of using natural gas as an energy source, but he believes the gas’ methane content is still a liability because it can contribute to climate change and be harmful to the public’s health.

“There’s quite a bit of leakage of methane in the drilling process and then in some of the downstream portions in the pipelines and compressors,” Leyden said.

Unless the amount of methane leakage is 1 percent or less, the benefit of cleaner emissions from natural gas is lost, according to Leyden. The Environmental Defense Fund has participated in studies, some conducted in conjunction with the university, in order to figure out exactly how much methane is lost in drilling.

There has been a prolific increase in natural gas production over the past few years, according to Kevin Howell, chairman of the board of Illinois Power Generating Company. Despite the increase, Howell said economic fluctuation is still consistent in the natural gas industry.

“This industry’s just had a history of kind of boom-bust cycles — we’ve been in a bit of a boom cycle here, there’s no doubt in my mind we’ll have a bust cycle again,” Howell said.

Danielle Murray, manager of Solar Energy Services at Austin Energy, said she believes it is important for the natural gas industry to pace its development based on the amount of funding it receives. “There is a high risk on the economic side of the industry because natural gas’

efficiency isn't as high as energy sources like solar and wind, so its future is uncertain," Murray said.

Andrew Reimers, mechanical engineering grad student, said he felt the panelists' wide range of backgrounds and opinions enriched the discussion. "The most important aspect of the panel is that it sort of covered a lot of aspects of the different people involved in that conversation," said Reimers.

This panel is the third of nine that will be occurring throughout campus this week. More information on UT Energy Week's events can be found at <https://energyweek.utexas.edu>.