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## The Climate Scientist Fossil-Fuel Companies Can't Stand; Robert Howarth's research on natural gas exports influenced the White House and exasperated oil and gas executives

[Warren, Kate](#). *Wall Street Journal (Online)* Dow Jones & Company Inc. Mar 31, 2024.

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### Full Text

Robert Howarth is getting under the skin of the oil-and-gas industry. The gray-haired climate scientist says he doesn't care.

Howarth, a methane researcher at Cornell University, said in a recent study that exports of liquefied natural gas from the U.S. were so bad for the climate that ending the use of LNG should be a global priority. The research influenced President Biden's decision in January to pause new approvals of LNG exports .

The turn of events riled executives throughout the fracking industry—especially at Pittsburgh-based EQT, the country's largest natural-gas producer.

The fracker extracts natural gas from Appalachian fields and has been evangelizing the benefits of U.S. LNG, which it says can help reduce carbon emissions abroad. EQT is campaigning to quadruple the nation's export capacity by 2030. T-shirts it sells online are marked with the words "UNLEASH U.S. LNG."

William Jordan, EQT's general counsel, said Howarth has been seeking to influence policymakers at the expense of rigor. He said Howarth crossed the line between research and advocacy, and his work contributes to a false narrative that shutting down natural gas pipelines and blocking LNG plants helps mitigate climate change.

"It's a problem when the purpose of scientific research shifts from gaining understanding to influencing," Jordan said in the company's first public remarks about the research.

After Republicans and Democrats in Washington last year asked EQT about Howarth's research, EQT did a deep dive into the scientist's work. It put together a PowerPoint presentation for policymakers that raised questions about Howarth's methods and his ties to anti-fracking groups, according to people familiar with the matter.

Howarth, a tenured faculty member at Cornell for nearly 40 years, said EQT's rebuke annoyed him but didn't surprise him. "The oil-and-gas industry has a track record of trying to trash the reputations of scientists whose results they do not like."

Howarth's work has brought him scorn across the industry. The Independent Petroleum Association of America, one of the industry's largest lobbying groups, recently described his research as "biased and agenda-driven."

The sparring underscores what is at stake for frackers. Gas producers argue that natural gas is much cleaner than coal and has an important role to play in the nascent energy transition. The industry says rising global coal consumption proves developing nations can't just leap to renewables and need a cleaner substitute. In the U.S., a projected surge in electricity demand has utilities and tech companies discussing the need for more fossil fuel.

But opposition to new natural gas infrastructure, which will produce new greenhouse gas emissions for decades, is ramping up. Environmentalists have singled out exports of U.S. LNG, saying they hurt the climate, the U.S. economy and local communities.

Environmentalists say exports of U.S. LNG—such as from this terminal in Cameron Parish, Louisiana—hurt the climate, the U.S. economy and local communities. PHOTO: MERIDITH KOHUT for The Wall Street Journal

One weapon in their arsenal has been Howarth. He said both academics and activists had encouraged him to research the greenhouse gas footprint of U.S. LNG. He concluded that leaks of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, made LNG exports worse than burning coal over a 20-year period. Last fall, he publicly shared his analysis before it had undergone peer review.

Green activists and Democratic lawmakers cited the research as they lobbied the Biden administration to block planned LNG terminals on the U.S. Gulf Coast.

Not peer reviewed

Jordan said Howarth eschewed scientific accountability as he sought to influence policymaking by releasing his study before it had been peer-reviewed. EQT has criticized Biden's pause, saying it would hamper the country's ability to help lower emissions globally, and would withhold much-needed energy supplies from U.S. allies.

"If we're not following science, scientific consensus, then any single scientist can influence policy decisions for the good or for the bad," Jordan said.

Howarth said he would have preferred for his work to go through a peer-review process before publishing it. But he said he trusted his findings, and that he had an ethical duty to participate in an important debate in a timely manner.

"I've taken a calculated risk, and I wouldn't have taken the calculated risk unless I was really confident," he said.

In a way, Howarth had been on a collision course with EQT for years. The company says the U.S. sits on so much cheap natural gas that it could supply global markets for decades and help phase out global coal use. EQT Chief Executive Toby Rice has advocated for erecting new LNG terminals on the East Coast, which would allow it to ship more molecules to foreign markets abroad and increase demand for EQT's gas.

Jordan said Howarth's argument that shale gas is worse for the climate than coal relies on flawed assumptions about how much methane coal and shale gas emit, and that the scientist is cherry-picking data. He said a research effort involving academics and partially funded by EQT has found that at least in some parts of Appalachia where the company operates, coal mines emit much more methane than shale gas operations.

Howarth said he categorically denied Jordan's assertion that his assumptions are flawed or that he is selectively picking data. He noted he is one of the most cited scientists in the world, and said that overall, his research had been received positively by the rest of the scientific community.

"Many of my colleagues have congratulated me for having the wisdom to take on important topics such as methane from shale gas...and LNG in a timely way," he said.

This isn't Howarth's first time dueling with critics—or courting controversy. In 2011, he said in a study that natural gas fracking resulted in significant methane leaks. Though environmentalists praised the research, some scientists criticized it as sloppy, and the oil-and-gas industry lambasted Howarth as an anti-fossil fuel activist.

Environmental ties

Howarth has forged closer ties with environmental advocacy groups than some mainstream scientists are comfortable with.

He serves on the board of Food & Water Watch, a nonprofit that supports a national ban on fracking. The Park Foundation, a family foundation that opposes shale gas, has funded his work in part, including his LNG analysis. Jordan said these ties could be conflicts of interest.

Howarth said his paper clearly states that his work was funded in part by a grant from the Park Foundation, and that the foundation had no control whatsoever on the analysis. He doesn't receive compensation from Food & Water Watch for his directorship.

Several scientists said receiving research funding from advocacy groups is acceptable as long as the support is disclosed, and the funder has no role in the content of the studies they support.

Howarth has no plans to stop weighing in on fossil fuels' contribution to climate change.

"Albert Einstein spoke extensively about the moral obligation of scientists to push their information into the policy," he said. "It's part of who I am."

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