

Anti-Drilling Activists among Targets of PA Office of Homeland Security

ACLU calls for investigation

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It doesn't take much to get listed in the Pennsylvania Intelligence Bulletin – emailing reminders to attend an EPA public forum was enough to get some upstate NY environmental groups listed as “terror threats”. Warnings about these citizen groups were mixed in with notices about a multi-state militia “patriot training” event and alerts that jihadist groups were targeting gas and oil pipelines. The bulletin even included screenings for “Gasland” because of its potential to “intensify” anti-drilling protests.

The Pennsylvania Intelligence Bulletin (PIB) is nothing new, but last October the PA Office of Homeland Security outsourced intelligence-gathering activities to the Institute of Terrorism Research and Response (ITRR). They shelled out \$103,000 for the one-year contract that was to bring solid information aimed at preventing terrorist attacks on “critical infrastructure” in the state.

But when you read the PIB it becomes clear that much of the information, gleaned from the internet and other open sources, is about meetings held by Marcellus drilling opponents, tea party activists, animal rights groups, gay rights groups, and other such groups.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania (ACLU-PA) the intelligence bulletin was distributed to government and law enforcement officials, universities, gas drilling companies and industry lobbyists. Someone slipped up, because one of the bulletins was sent to an anti-drilling activist who immediately forwarded it to her fellows. Attached to the bulletin was an e-mail from Office of Homeland Security head James Powers that said, “We want to continue providing this support to the Marcellus Shale Formation natural gas stakeholders while not feeding those groups fomenting dissent against those same companies.”

FBI Warning

Apparently ITRR analysts were inspired to focus their attention on Marcellus-related activities following an FBI warning that environmental extremists could pose a threat to gas drilling. In the July 16 bulletin ITRR notes their “Increasing and expanding focus on Marcellus” and explains that anti-drilling groups will be “formally and informally sharing information regarding companies involved in oil and gas drilling in Pennsylvania.”

Every week ITRR listed “natural gas drilling events that may draw unruly crowds” including such events as a watershed meeting, a town commissioners meeting, a music festival, the Cabot community picnic, the PA Forestry Association meeting and the August 12 EPA meeting originally scheduled for Binghamton, NY. In most of the bulletins they describe citizens as being either “environmental activists and militants” or “landowners”.

In one bulletin they warn that the group intending to “force pressure tactics” on the EPA is a “loose organization of New York landowners who are in favor of natural gas drilling...” ITRR quotes from an e-mail that was widely circulated by the Joint Landowners Coalitions and forwarded to many people in this area by the Tioga County

Landowners Group: “EPA is coming to hear from you!” it says, urging people to show up and “be seen in solid support of gas development” both outside at a rally and inside the auditorium.

The bigger concern, apparently, was the projection of a large anti-drilling activist turn-out at the EPA meeting. ITRR based their warning for this huge turn-out on activist alerts from Shaleshock (Ithaca), ROUSE (Brooktondale) and NYRAD (NY Residents Against Drilling, in Binghamton).

“Shaleshock is basically a listserv and an educational resource,” says Lisa Wright, a concerned citizen who has attended some of their functions. She finds it “... pathetic that PA Homeland Security diverted resources to monitoring mostly middle-aged women in comfortable shoes who were planning to attend a hearing to exercise their First Amendment rights.”

Bill Podulka, a founding father of ROUSE is equally stymied by ITRR’s attention. “It is absolutely ludicrous that Homeland Security was monitoring these groups and their listserves,” Podulka says. “Exercising our rights of free speech and freedom of peaceful assembly should not draw the attention of anti-terrorist officials. I thought we had out-grown this kind of McCarthy-era thinking.”

News of the Pennsylvania Intelligence Bulletin was leaked mid-September. Since then, Governor Edward Rendell has apologized for the unwarranted snooping into citizen gatherings and cancelled the contract with ITRR. On Monday, September 27, the PA Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee subpoenaed Powers and others from the Office of Homeland Security and law enforcement to testify about the intelligence gathering activities.

On September 20 the ACLU-PA filed a Right to Know request asking for all records related to the anti-terrorism bulletins that included information about activists involved in lawful protests. The ACLU is also calling for a full investigation by an independent party.

PA Intelligence Bulletins Online

If you want to read the bulletins causing all the fuss, you can. The PA governor’s office posted them online a week ago at http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/homeland_security/14251/pa_in_telligence_bulletins/771845

SIDEBAR:

Who’s Got Your Information?

At this time the only group actively involved with investigating the intelligence bulletins is the Pennsylvania ACLU – the NYCLU did not know about NY groups being targeted by the bulletins. ACLU-PA has filed a “Right to Know” request with the Pennsylvania Office of Homeland Security (OHS) and the Pennsylvania State Police asking for information on the following:

- agreements between the Institute for Terrorism Research and Response and state agencies

- agreements between other private agencies and the state to provide surveillance and intelligence information about terrorism threats
- the source of funds paid to ITRR or other private parties engaged in surveillance
- the identities of all persons or entities who received all or parts of the Pennsylvania Intelligence Bulletins

If you or your group believes you have been targeted by these bulletins, the ACLU suggests that you file a Right to Know request. They have templates on their website and they promise to provide assistance to anyone who encounters difficulties during the process. For help, go to <http://www.aclupa.org/issues/freespeech/filearighttoknowrequest> or call 215-592-1513.