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## PERCEPTIONS OF HYDRAULIC FRACTURING NEAR PUBLIC PARKS AND RECREATIONAL FACILITIES: AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION

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INTRODUCTION AND AIM OF THE PAPER

Public parks and recreational facilities are important nodes within multi-scale community sport systems found across Europe, Australasia, and North America. In addition to offering protections to the environment and wildlife, they provide numerous opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity across skill levels and age. The programs and services offered in local, provincial–state, and national parks allow for citizens from diverse population groups to pursue sport, recreation, and leisure. The preservation and continued accessibility of these spaces—and the natural environments of which they are a part—is therefore paramount to fostering healthy lifestyles and reversing the downward trends in youth physical activity and sport participation.

These spaces are significant to a number of stakeholders; while less apparent than park visitors and community members, energy companies are becoming increasingly active users because of the valuable pockets of natural gas that underlie many public spaces. Following the innovation of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, to effectively collect natural gas, there has been growing interest in placing exploration and extraction wells in or adjacent to a number of public park and forest systems across Europe and North America (e.g., Cowell, 2013; Rowland & Drabold, 2014). Opponents of fracking leases on public land have argued that in addition to air contaminants and polluted greywater on recreational fields, park acreage will be lost to fracking operations and park attendance will decrease. For sport managers, these outcomes would be especially troubling given the role that public green spaces are expected to play in reversing the decline in youth sport participation (The Aspen Institute, 2015) and creating new generations of physically active sport participants.

Thus, the purposes of this presentation are to explore the sport–fracking link and to consider the extent—if any—to which fracking operations taking place in or around designated public parks affect expectations of continued participation in sport and physical activity in such areas. Specifically, we apply Value–Belief–Norm theory (Steg, Dreijerink, & Abrahamse, 2005) to evaluate park users’ general attitudes toward fracking and public policy and their perceptions about how fracking operations impact their recreational activity. While there is a growing body of literature focused on environmental issues in sport management, this study represents the first investigation specifically looking at fracking operations related to sport.

#### METHOD, RESEARCH DESIGN, AND DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, we begin a preliminary exploration of the potential effects of fracking on or near publicly accessible parkland, focusing in particular on the possible implications for sport and recreation participants and administrators. To achieve this aim, a purposive sampling technique was used to distribute surveys to 250 park users in the Appalachian Basin of the eastern US; this region was selected because it is home to a number of state and national parks—public land used for sport and recreation—currently considering or having already consented to fracking. Participants’ attitudes toward the environment and fracking were measured using a 55-item survey adapted from scales by Steg et al. (2005) and The University of Texas at Austin Energy Poll (The University of Texas at Austin, 2014). The instrument was also used to assess park users’ perceptions of the extent to which park-proximate fracking impacts their sport-participation levels (e.g., decline of public spaces of play, less resources for sport leagues, privatization of physical activity). Descriptive and regression analyses will provide insight into how sport and physical activity may be impacted by the trend of fracking in public park areas.

#### RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

Data collection is currently underway; therefore, results will be discussed in their entirety during the presentation. The connection between sport and fracking is critical for sport management scholars, but this research has a number of implications for practitioners as well. Examining potential sport park participants’ attitudes toward the environment and fracking can provide insight into future fracking and youth sport infrastructure and policy decisions. Additionally, identifying these links can contribute understanding into individual decisions to engage in physical activity and in sport participation and provide preliminary indication of the possible impact of these decisions on health, the environment, and local economies.

In light of the lack of existing literature on the topic, we dedicate a portion of this presentation to outlining a interdisciplinary agenda for future inquiry in order to demonstrate the wide relevance of fracking to sport management scholarship. Applicable sub-disciplines include environmental studies and recreation, public policy and political science, and marketing and sponsorship. This stream of research can contribute to the growing scholarship on sport and environmental sustainability, while broadening sport management scholarship

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through new interdisciplinary theory development.

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