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January 25, 2013

Unintended Earthquakes

Relatively small (Mw < 6) earthquakes in unusual locations have become an important topic of scientific and political discussion in both North America and Europe because of the concern that some of them have been induced by industrial activity. It has long been understood that earthquakes can be induced by impoundment of reservoirs, surface and underground mining, withdrawal of fluids and gas from the subsurface, and injection of fluids into underground formations. Injection induced earthquakes, in particular, have become a focus of discussion as the widespread application of hydraulic fracturing has transformed the energy economy in the U.S. The industry, the public and regulatory agencies are all concerned by the possibility that damaging earthquakes can be induced as part of the process to stimulate the production of natural gas and oil from tight shale formations, or by disposal of waste water associated with their stimulation and production. In this talk, I will review the science behind injection induced earthquakes, examine the evidence linking recent earthquake activity and industrial activities, and discuss the key scientific challenges to be met for managing the risk.