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Public Perception of the Oil and Gas Industry: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Gene L. Theodori, Sam Houston State University, and Douglas Jackson-Smith, Utah State University

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Abstract

Data collected in a general population survey from a random sample of individuals in Tarrant County, Texas, were used to empirically explore issues associated with public perception of the natural gas industry. In addition, the association of public perception of the energy industry with dependent measures such as individual-level actions that (a) may or may not have been taken and/or (b) may or may not be taken in response to the exploration and production of natural gas was investigated. Echoing findings from research in two neighboring Barnett Shale counties (Theodori 2009), it appears that members of the general public in Tarrant County distrust the intrusion of the gas industry and dislike certain potentially problematic social and/or environmental issues perceived to accompany development. Conversely, these same Tarrant County residents appreciate and view less negatively the economic and/or service-related benefits that tend to result from such development. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that the social/environmental perceptual variable is a key factor to explaining past behaviors and predicting future behaviors taken in response to the exploration and production of natural gas. Possible implications of these findings for the energy industry are proposed.

Introduction

For the past nine years, the Gallup Organization has polled Americans on their views of more than 20 business and industry sectors in the country. The survey asks respondents to rate each business and industry sector in the United States on a five-point scale ranging from “very positive” to “very negative.” Between 2001 and 2009, the industries ranking near the top and bottom of the list remained fairly consistent. Either the computer industry or the restaurant industry topped the list as the most positively viewed industry sector each year (computer industry rated most favorably in 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2008, and 2009; restaurant industry rated most favorably in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009).