

Industry takes issue with 'fracking' acts

BY BRETT CLANTON

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HOUSTON — Anyone scoring the debate over hydraulic fracturing would notice that critics of the controversial oil and natural gas extraction process have lately put a few points on the board.

They include two new studies from universities that cast doubt on emissions and potential water contamination from the process, and the announcement this month of a new [Energy Department](#) panel.

The recent activity has put the oil and gas industry on the defensive at times, and provided critics of hydraulic fracturing, often called “fracking,” with more ammunition as they push for tougher regulation.

“The next order of business is going to have to be holding politicians' feet to the fire,” said [Tyson Slocum](#), director of the energy program at [Public Citizen](#), a watchdog group in Washington.

But while industry representatives acknowledge the opposition has gotten the public's attention, they do not see this as a tide-turning moment in the debate.

“From a substance point of view, I'm not sure we've seen the other side advance the ball down the field as far as you might think,” said [Chris Tucker](#), who runs an industry-backed website called Energy in Depth that attempts to refute many of the leading arguments against hydraulic fracturing. “If anything, it's a teachable moment because now we have a captive audience.”

In hydraulic fracturing, millions of gallons of water, sand and chemicals are injected into a well at high pressure to create multiple fractures in the rock and free trapped gas or oil.

Though the industry has used the process for decades, it has come under scrutiny recently as producers push into shale formations estimated to hold enough natural gas to meet U.S. demand for 100 years.

The past few months alone have seen an onslaught of high-profile inquiries and critiques.

A [New York Times](#) investigation in March found lax regulation in Pennsylvania allows toxic wastewater from hydraulic fracturing to enter public waterways.

In April, a paper by scientists at [Cornell University](#) argued that shale gas, touted as a cleaner alternative to coal, could actually be a worse contributor to climate change because of methane that leaks into the air during fracturing.

This month, [Duke University](#) scientists found dangerous levels of methane in water wells near shale gas wells in Pennsylvania and New York.

The latter recalled hotly debated scenes from the Oscar-nominated documentary Gasland, which showed homeowners in Colorado and Wyoming igniting tap water they said contained natural gas that seeped into aquifers after hydraulic fracturing.

Industry has taken issue with the findings in both studies, in some cases dismissing them outright. It maintains that hydraulic fracturing is time-tested and safe.

“There is no question in my mind that natural gas can be developed in a way that's acceptable to the landowner and those that have concerns,” said [Marvin Odum](#), [Royal Dutch Shell's](#) top U.S. executive, in a recent interview.

But it's also clear that the industry is beginning to feel more pressure to answer its critics.

Exxon Mobil Corp., for instance, just began a campaign aimed at dispelling the notion that shale gas development threatens the environment or public health. The campaign includes advertisements and town hall meetings in areas where shale exploration is taking place.

Legislation before Congress, known as the FRAC Act, would require more disclosures by oil companies on fluids used in hydraulic fracturing and brings the process under federal environmental laws, rather than leaving it to the states to regulate.

In Texas, a measure that would require companies to disclose chemicals used in the process has passed the state [Senate and House](#) in slightly different forms, and a conference committee will have to try to reconcile the two bills.

Ronnie Crocker contributed to this story.

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