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Leave hydraulic fracturing fight to states

By Michael J. Economides - 05/11/11 11:06 AM ET

More than 60 years ago when the technique was first pioneered, discussion of hydraulic fracturing was limited to a small cabal of engineers and academics. After it evolved as the premier oil and gas production technique and a \$13 billion industry, the term is now echoing through the halls of Congress and beyond.

Already this year, numerous regional meetings, congressional hearings, expert task forces, and federal workshops have been convened to address the issue. Treatment of fracturing as a new technology by these numerous panels is telling. Despite decades of use in millions of wells, many public officials and opinion leaders have been caught off guard by the ever expanding opportunity to apply the fracturing process to extract previously unobtainable supplies of natural gas.

Not everyone's surprised, though. For instance, this week's House hearing on best practices and standards for fracturing turned to those who have been most engaged with it in the field – state oil and gas regulators.

Despite controversy over the status of state regulations, when our leaders wish to put politics and posturing aside and learn the true state of affairs, it is these local officials -- rather than EPA regulators or NGOs -- they turn to for answers.

It's important that these experts continue to be the main source for directing natural gas development as well.

On shore exploration and production activities vary significantly from place to place, due to a variety of factors. Drillers in Texas' Barnett Shale must adapt to the fact that significant portions of the field are in urban settings, while those working in Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale face vastly different environmental and engineering challenges where forested land and pristine waters are their primary concern in the rural settings being developed right now.

In each of these states, local agencies have crafted regulations to address these regional qualities. For example, the Texas Rail Road Commission and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality have worked together closely to enact specific city ordinances that ensure the safety and health of the local residents and environment surrounding the Barnett.

Consequently, a shift from state to federal regulation would be akin to replacing a handyman's collection of various tools with a single sledgehammer.

Running a campaign to propagate faulty claims about fracturing's safe history and successful regulation, the anti-gas lobby is maneuvering to frighten the public and, thereby, create momentum for unfounded and unnecessary restrictions on development that will restrict local regulators.

Study upon study has concluded that hydraulic fracturing doesn't pose a risk to drinking water. In fact, the

last comprehensive study on the issue was conducted by the federal government in 2004, in which EPA found no substantiated cases nationwide of fracturing fluid contaminating groundwater. That evidence stands today.

Anti-gas activists haven't let a dearth of evidence silence their claims though. A very telling example is a bizarre report just released by Duke University that set off a media frenzy by attempting to draw spurious conclusions based on the presence of methane in drinking water wells and the proximity of those wells to shale gas drilling sites.

The headlines, however, failed to mention that the report itself admits "the study found no evidence of contamination from hydraulic fracturing fluids or saline produced waters."

Researchers also failed to collect baseline data on the quantity of methane that existed in the wells before drilling began. This is critical, as methane occurs naturally in water in the region where the study was conducted. In fact, the gas presence is a key tool in finding gas resources. Without this baseline information, it's impossible to understand the significance of this correlation.

The larger problem stems from the way portentous headlines distract from the real issue. Additives injected deep underground in a well-constructed shale well don't affect the quality of our water in the same way chemicals contained in a well constructed jet engine don't affect the health of passengers in the plane. The key is ensuring proper well design and proper wastewater treatment/disposal.

Thankfully, state regulators have been working harmoniously with industry representatives to achieve that goal. Unfortunately, this kind of effective collaboration just doesn't make for good doomsday headlines.

Dr. Economides is the editor-in-chief of the Energy Tribune, a chemical and biomolecular engineering professor at the University of Houston, and a witness before [today's House Science & Technology Committee hearing](#).

Source:

<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/energy-a-environment/160483-leave-hydraulic-fracturing-fight-to-states>

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