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Opinion

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Natural Resources Defense Council accuses Environmental Defense Fund of spinning for oil and gas industry

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By: [Mark Hemingway](#)
Commentary Staff Writer
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Well, that’s the long and short of it anyway. Amy Mall of the Natural Resources Defense Council [criticizes a recent blog post of mine where I discussed the controversy over fracking](#), a.k.a. hydraulic fracturing — a process that involves pumping a solution that is 99 percent sand and water, plus a few trace chemicals, underground at high pressure to extract natural gas:

The column repeats the same spin we’ve heard all along from the oil and gas industry, and also suggests that environmental and local groups have changed their positions on this dangerous procedure. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact remains that fracking is a drastically under-regulated practice that poses serious threats to human health, drinking water, and the environment. And our government needs to protect communities against those threats.

But bizarrely, Mall *completely* ignores the point of my blog post (it was not a column), which was headlined “[Environmental Defense Fund admits propaganda effort against natural gas exploration is bunk](#)“:

Now fracking is being defended by a very unlikely source — the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), one of the biggest and most active environmental non-profits in the country. Appearing on the Energy and Environment program “On Point” EDF Senior Policy Advisor was utterly dismissive of the concerns about fracking:

E&E TV: “Do you believe that [hydraulic fracturing] can be used safely?” (5:23)

EDF’s Scott Anderson: “Yes I do. I think in the vast majority of cases, if wells are constructed right and operated right, that hydraulic fracturing will not cause a problem.” (5:19)

E&E TV: “How difficult is it for states to regulate this practice? And should it be done on a state-by-state bases, a region-by-region bases or nationally?” (2:11)

EDF’s Scott Anderson: “The states actually have a lot of knowledge and experience in regulating well construction and operation. We think that states have every reason to be able to tackle this issue and do it well. We also think that if states fail in that and the federal government has to takeover, the states will have no one but themselves to blame.” (2:00)

And EDF’s Scott Anderson goes on and on to emphasize the practice is safe and effectively regulated. Why doesn’t Mall address the opinion of the EDF? My guess is that it’s easier to claim I’m a shill for the oil and gas industry, than it is for her to make the same claim against her fellow environmental activists. But lets take a closer look at her column, shall we?:

The Examiner columnist, Mark Hemingway, repeats a series of falsehoods. For example, he says “multiple EPA studies have shown fracking is safe and effective.” But the only EPA report on this topic was heavily criticized as a study that was politically influenced and did not meet fundamental scientific standards. Key scientific information was omitted, and the EPA Inspector General at the time even found that it warranted an investigation.

That’s precisely why EPA is in the process right now of embarking on the first-ever comprehensive scientific study of the health and environmental risks associated with fracking. NRDC and others have supported this action, and offered suggestions on how it should be done, because we know we desperately need more solid research about the safety and risks of fracking to best protect human health and our environment.

Mall is right about one thing, the EPA has only conducted one proper scientific study on the matter — which, despite her protestations, essentially concluded the process was safe and effectively regulated. When I wrongly said the EPA has conducted “multiple studies,” I conflated the EPA study with studies by the Ground Water Protection Council (GWPC) and the Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission (IOGCC) and other authorities that have also concluded fracking is safe. However, the EPA has said plenty of things about fracking over the years unrelated to the 2004 study:

- [EPA in 1995](#): “[G]iven the horizontal and vertical distance between the drinking water well and the closest methane gas production wells, the possibility of contamination or endangerment of USDWs [underground sources of drinking water] is **extremely remote**.” (emphasis added)

- [EPA in 2004](#): “Although thousands of ... methane wells are fractured annually, EPA did not find confirmed evidence that drinking water wells have been contaminated by hydraulic fracturing fluid injection...”

- [EPA in 2009](#) (hearing before Senate EPW Committee): Sen. Inhofe: “Do any one of you know of one case of ground water contamination that has resulted from hydraulic fracturing?” **Peter Silva, EPA asst. administrator for water: “Not that I’m aware of, no.”** Cynthia Giles, EPA asst. administrator for compliance: “I understand there’s some anecdotal evidence [sic.], but I don’t know that it’s been firmly established.” Inhofe: “So the answer is no, you don’t know of it.” *Cynthia Giles nods*.

- [EPA in 2010](#): “‘I have no information that states aren’t doing a good job already,’ Steve Heare, director of EPA’s Drinking Water Protection Division said on the sidelines of a state

regulators conference here. He also said despite claims by environmental organizations, **he hadn't seen any documented cases that the hydro-fracking process was contaminating water supplies.**" (Dow Jones Newswires, [2/26/10](#))

That technicality aside (it's hardly a "series of fasehoods"), fracking has been studied extensively and has been going on for over 60 years. And we're just now discovering a rash of problems all at once? Anyone else see the problem with what Mall is saying here?

One one hand, she says fracking is a "drastically under-regulated practice that poses serious threats to human health, drinking water, and the environment. And our government needs to protect communities against those threats." Then on the other hand, Mall is saying "EPA is in the process right now of embarking on the first-ever comprehensive scientific study ... because we know we desperately need more solid research about the safety and risks of fracking to best protect human health and our environment."

So if we "desperately need more research" on the matter and we have yet to conduct a comprehensive study of fracking — and again, that means we're going to disregard the considerable evidence that the process is safe and effectively regulated by the states — how can you say that the process is "drastically under-regulated" and "poses serious threats to human health"?

I would like to give Mall the benefit of the doubt that she knows more about certain environmental matters than I do, as she works at the Natural Resources Defense Council and I just started researching this issue in depth over the last few months. But as a journalist I can smell propaganda a mile upwind, and Mall's highly selective use of evidence and contradictory arguments reek of it.

P.S. Speaking of propaganda, the State of Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission in Colorado just issued [a report further debunking the documentary Sundance-award-winning *Gasland*](#), which earlier this year helped popularize the concerns over fracking.

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