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Natural gas: study raises doubts on U.S. supply

May 17, 2011 | 4:35 pm

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The United States does not have a decades-long supply of inexpensive, locally sourced natural gas, according to a new report commissioned by the Post Carbon Institute, a nonprofit think tank that examines issues related to the economy, energy and the environment.

The report, titled "Will Natural Gas Fuel America in the 21st Century?," is a challenge to the commonly cited projection that domestic natural gas can meet U.S. demand for more than 100 years. It comes on the heels of the U.S. Energy Information Agency's 2011 Energy Outlook released last month that projected an almost fourfold increase in domestic shale gas production by 2035 and growing use of natural gas to generate electricity.

"The question is what would it take in order to do that?" said study author David Hughes, a geoscientist who serves on the board of the Assn. for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas-Canada and is a fellow at the Post Carbon Institute in Santa Rosa, Calif.

Hughes estimates there is only a 12-year supply of easily accessible, domestic natural gas. He said the number of producing gas wells almost doubled from 1990 to 2010, but the productivity of each well has declined nearly 50% over the same 20-year period.

"More and more infrastructure will be necessary to maintain productivity," Hughes said. "One has to drill a huge number of wells to keep production going."

Until 2006, about 10,000 gas wells were drilled each year. Even with the current rate of 25,000 wells per year, "I don't think that's enough drilling to continue growing gas production," said Hughes, adding that "reserves have been greatly overstated."

According to the nonprofit Potential Gas Committee, a volunteer organization overseen by the Colorado School of Mines, U.S. natural gas resources increased by more than 900 trillion cubic feet between 2000 and 2011 to 2,100 trillion cubic feet.

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"Even as we've been drawing trillions of cubic feet out of the ground and thus out of the resource base, the resource assessment continues to grow," said Daphne Magnuson, spokeswoman for the Natural Gas Supply Assn. in Washington, D.C.

Magnuson said natural gas is far easier and more economical to access than it was a decade ago with conventional wells, which explains the dramatic projections of reserves. More than 20 states have natural gas shale deposits.

"We continue to discover more at such a rapid rate that shale maps are quickly outdated," she said. "The natural gas industries consider the U.S. 'the Saudi Arabia of natural gas.'"

But according to Hughes of the Post Carbon Institute, growing U.S. natural gas production would require at least 30,000 wells per year, and "there's likely to be major impacts environmentally that go along with that supply grid," he said.

Numerous environmental groups have raised concerns around groundwater contamination and the improper treatment of the fluids used in hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, to extract natural gas from shale. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is investigating hydrofracking and will release its study of the practice in late 2012.

"The nature of natural gas as a clean bridge fuel to renewable energy is highly suspect because of its environmental footprint, lack of ability to scale and full-cycle greenhouse gas emissions" that could be exponentially worse than coal in the short term, Hughes said.

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-- Susan Carpenter

Photo: A natural gas drilling rig in Pennsylvania. Credit: Andrew Rush / Associated Press

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Now, what do youi think the bias of a "fellow" of the Post Carbon Institute might be?

Posted by: dhwj | May 20, 2011 at 10:59 PM

I do believe gas maven to be an industry shill or lobbyiest, one and the same.

Enviro-nazis? That's so Limbaugh.

I'm not agreeing or disagreeing with the article and I'm actually quite fond of natural gas just not the gasbags like Limbaugh.

Fracking is a problem currently in that it pollutes groundwater and unless you want to poison generations to come then polluting groundwater is stupid.

They need to find a way to do without the chemicals they're currently using.

Posted by: affableman | May 19, 2011 at 11:29 AM

The price of natural gas has declined since its peak in 2008 by over 60%. IF David Hughes were correct current prices of natural gas an enormous opportunity for long speculators.

It is natural that someone who is a member of the board of an organization called Peak Oil and Gas formed BEFORE this decline to deny the evidence of greater than previously anticipated natural gas supply which comes from many sources with no such as the Colorado School of Mines with no obvious stake in the answer. Shale gas is a threat to David Hughes career.

Posted by: Levis Kochin | May 18, 2011 at 08:28 PM

I have to agree with Glenn you are correct the enviro-nazis are killing this country inch by inch and the populace has no clue. 99% of what is seen or heard on the media about hydro-fracking is false. Bottom line is it's the liberal's typical MO showing face [make a big commotion, force industry's hands for \$ etc. rest is history]. As far as the 1% what the industry needs is not more regulation, there is plenty of that. What they need are enforcers that enforce regulations thru honest procedures rather than getting paid off by the minority of irresponsible sub-contractors to look the other way. As long as the surface casing with its cement squeeze is done properly and given the time needed to cure as per code there

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can never be a leak.

The proof of that are over 91000 wells in the state of PA alone with never a problem from the hydrofracture. There have been a few instances of leakage from frac pits and that's why there are the water purifiers that clean the frac waters. What people do not realize is that methane gas has been evaporating from the earth's surface for 100's of years, it's a vapor that comes from the earth and that what vapors do, period. That is also how natural gas was discovered way back when (Indians founds evidence of gas & oil in the rivers where the fuels would migrate & find their way to the surface.

As far as co2 emission levels are concerned Here are the facts (Liberals: read & weep): Natural gas is rated at 117,000 lbs/bbtu - Oil rates at 164,000 lbs/bbtu and Coal comes in at 208,000 lbs/bbtu (source: EIA, NG issues & trends 1998) clearly Natural Gas is the fuel of "No Choice". It's the only fuel that we have in abundance that can free us from foreign fuel. Renewable energy will take decades to become mainstream; we must drill baby drill otherwise you can kiss your luxuries goodbye and its back to the stone ages my friends. This is the bottom line like it or not!!

Posted by: the gas maven | May 18, 2011 at 01:23 PM

Humorous that a comment by "Facts please" attributes 'presumptively accurate' to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, an agency whose track record shows exactly the opposite.

I'll READ the report before I crow about a lack of info/date from a short article.

Posted by: Tom Druso | May 18, 2011 at 09:24 AM

we find a clean energy source and the enviro-nazis don't want to let us use it, no wonder the "environmental" movement is losing credibility!!!

Posted by: glenn grab | May 18, 2011 at 08:19 AM

The U.S. Energy Information Agency is the government assessment so it is presumptively accurate. Their projections can be seen at

<http://www.eia.doe.gov/naturalgas/>

This article is unclear, what are and will be our projected NG needs? From reading the above numbers and the DOE numbers it is unclear, how much do we have in proven and likely reserves?

And yes, the fracking liquids they use have been poisoning water aquifers so that is going to have to be remedied. I would also like to know the projected CO2 emissions to switching over the natural gas.

Posted by: Facts please | May 18, 2011 at 02:05 AM

You'll die in the dark because you're running out of cheap energy, not because someone reports on it.

The biggest argument against having democracy in the USA is a 5 minute conversation with the average voter. Yanks are bloody fools, all of 'em. I hope N Korea nukes you.

Posted by: jimmyhealth | May 18, 2011 at 01:53 AM

gofracyourselves, sounds like Susan Carpenter is in the electric save-all side of the energy argument based on her articles.

Posted by: Honda GX Pilot | May 17, 2011 at 10:57 PM

horrible bias, we'd all die in the dark if it were up to people like this

Posted by: gofrackyourself | May 17, 2011 at 07:27 PM



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