

ALEX MILLS: New York Times article on natural gas distorts truth

By Alex Mills

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A recent story in The New York Times, with the headline of "Regulation Lax as Gas Wells' Tainted Water Hits Rivers," does a woeful job of trying to pin the pollution of the free world — or at least western Pennsylvania — on the exploration and production activities of the natural gas industry.

The author, Ian Urbina, uses the magic of words to scare the public into thinking they are drinking water contaminated with carcinogens such as benzene and radioactive elements.

Urbina alleges that waste water from natural gas exploration activities is being improperly dumped into waste water treatment plants by oil companies.

Why would these companies do such a terrible thing to their fellow Americans?

Urbina states in the story that the reason for such blatant and irresponsible activities is — you guessed it — greed. He says the companies

can cut cost and increase profits by poisoning the good citizens of Pennsylvania.

To substantiate his claim, Urbina quotes former Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection Secretary John Hanger as saying there are business pressures to cut corners.

Hanger, however, says he has never talked to Urbina.

Hanger said after the story was published, "The article excludes information completely ... (and) used misleading words to conceal important points, and consistently shaped information to advance (a certain) narrative."

Urbina's "radioactive elements" are what the industry calls Naturally Occurring Radioactive Materials, and they are found naturally in rocks in the ground and other places.

NORM is encountered every day. The oil and gas industry in Texas has had regulations covering NORM for more than 15 years.

NORM is something the industry needs to be aware of, but it occurs in such small quantities that it is normally far below harmful levels of exposure.

Urbina refers to a "confidential industry study" conducted in 1990 by the American

Petroleum Institute that found that NORM posed "potentially significant risks" of cancer for people who eat fish from Louisiana because of the concentration of NORM in the water from drilling activities.

API says the study is not confidential and has been available to the public since 1991, adding that "it can be concluded that the risks associated with the discharge of produce water to coastal Louisiana is small."

Why would a reporter go to such lengths to distort and even create a story to cause so much damage?

There is a lot of competition at any newspaper and television news department to get printed, get a byline, get a big headline, get on Page 1.

It is a much bigger story if it involves pollution by oil companies, willful disregard for the health and safety of your fellow human beings, regulators not doing their job, hiding "confidential" and damaging studies.

Stories such as the one authored by Urbina are not new and unfortunately will continue as long as reporters try to manipulate the facts to obtain more attention for their work.

The same disregard of objectivity and fairness has been exhibited in reporting about the exploration in the Barnett Shale.

One newspaper even wrote a series of stories several years ago exposing all this bad stuff called NORM that resulted from exploration and production in the Barnett Shale.

It later learned that the state had adopted regulations governing NORM years before.

The New York Times is just now catching up with sensationalizing the news when it comes to the oil and gas industry and the environment.



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