
Re-thinking the fracking debate

By Juliette Kayyem

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THE PROBLEM with “fracking,” the process of capturing natural gas from shale reserves, isn’t simply its unfortunate name. It’s the role it plays in the politically explosive debate over how the United States can best reduce its energy dependence. Fracking provokes concerns about public health and the environment, and has pitted scientists, activists, and the energy industry in a seemingly endless battle over the tradeoffs involved in creating a long-term sustainable energy economy.

Fortunately, a new independent report commissioned by the Department of Energy, and overseen by MIT Professor and former CIA Director John Deutch, gets straight to the point. And instead of moving us “past the debate,” the phrase commonly used when resolution can’t be found, it embraces the conflict head on.

Fracking describes the second phase of a drilling process utilized by workers seeking to reach what are commonly called “unconventional deposits” of natural gas. In these tighter rock formations, workers must first drill into underground shale beds, and then essentially saturate the area with a high pressure cocktail of water, sand, and chemicals that open up the shale deposits and release the gas.

It sounds violent and messy, and it is. If not addressed, legitimate concerns over how to handle the contaminated water, what types of warnings should be posted, and the collateral damage from trucks and workers in normally pristine areas will undermine the country’s ability to produce inexpensive power.

Natural gas is a big deal, and fracking has transformed energy policies. Natural gas now constitutes 25 percent of US energy consumption. In only 10 years, shale gas, released through fracking, has risen from 2 to 30 percent of all natural-gas production. Shale depositories in states as geographically diverse as Texas, Montana, and New York have made the US essentially self-sufficient in natural-gas production, and even potentially an exporter of the commodity.

That is good news for Massachusetts. The controversial Weaver’s Cove LNG terminal that was proposed for Fall River was abandoned in part because importing natural gas in huge ships from Trinidad or Yemen to flow through expensive pipelines is no longer economically viable. One day, we might even imagine Mayor Menino’s longtime nemesis, the Everett LNG terminal, being closed.

Fracking has also been good for consumers. It has pushed down natural-gas prices, and homes with gas heat now have half the winter bills of those using oil.

I have spent a considerable amount of my career around energy companies and the people they employ. Humility is not a job qualification. Not knowing better, I opposed fracking because its proponents were hardly bedfellows. I’ve never quite accepted the notion of “drill, baby, drill,” and the way the term can be used to convey hostility to renewable energy.

And that was the problem. Sides have been chosen, with little room for negotiation. The genius of the new report by Deutch’s committee is its courage in entering the political debate, in essentially saying “we all know nobody trusts each other here.” The report outlines the benefits of fracking, but issues an important admonishment to an industry that tends to fight rather than listen: If you want to frack, then help us to help you. In a post

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oil-spill world, no one will believe that you know best, nor that the process is completely pure.

“There are genuine environmental concerns and those can be disruptive to communities,” Deutch told me. Greater monitoring of water and air pollution, disclosure of chemical composition, sharing of best practices for recycling waste water, and willingness to accept more regulations are all important in establishing the one precondition necessary to make natural gas successful: public confidence.

Greater oversight and disclosure will help save the industry, not kill it. It may even move skeptics to accept risks,

because they are known and are far outweighed by the benefits. And that can only be good for a nation that at times can be so fractured - and fracktured - about its energy policies.

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