

David Litman: A businessman's perspective on urban fracking

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As business people, we love the economic benefits of the natural gas boom in Texas. It has created jobs, spurred manufacturing, enriched thousands of local landholders and juiced the profits of gas companies across the state. Gas generates more electricity than any other fuel source in Texas and has substantially lowered electricity costs. These lower prices attract more businesses to Texas, which in turn creates more jobs. Gas is cleaner burning than coal or oil. If used to fuel our cars, buses and trucks, it also will reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

But drilling for gas in an urban area also can cause air and water pollution. Beyond the fundamental environmental concerns, drillers need to ensure that businesses and residents in the area don't incur the costs that accompany pollution, whether that is increased health care costs or higher taxes to pay for water treatment. Drillers also need to use the best technologies to extract shale gas so that they can preclude the need for further state or federal regulation.

Drilling for natural gas can pose serious public health risks, including contamination of water supplies and the leaking of methane gas and other air pollutants. *The New York Times* recently reported that EPA documents show that wastewater from some gas drilling operations is radioactive and has contaminants that treatment plants cannot remove. Air monitors near some Barnett Shale drilling sites in North Texas have already detected elevated levels of cancer-causing pollutants such as benzene. Moreover, some local residents have reported foaming and discoloration in their well water. If wells are not constructed, completed and operated properly, gas and other toxic fumes can escape, underground water tables can be contaminated, and wastewater can pollute surface water supplies. This has happened in Texas and other parts of the country.

Most of the concerns about extracting natural gas from the Barnett Shale stem from a process known as hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," in which pumps force sand, water and hundreds of chemicals under extremely high pressure into a well, forming fissures in the shale that allow the trapped natural gas to escape and be captured at the wellhead. Done right, this process should not pollute our air or water.

Gas well operators also should publicly disclose the chemicals they use in fracking, as Range Resources has done when drilling in Pennsylvania. Bills in the Texas Legislature and U.S. Congress would mandate such disclosures. The industry has opposed revealing the chemicals, some of which are toxic and can seep into groundwater. Do drillers really want to be the subject of a negative newspaper exposé or onerous state or federal regulations? This should be a no-brainer.

Also consider that the air quality in North Texas is already a problem, and gas wells contribute to VOCs (volatile organic compound) emissions because of the diesel engines used in the process. While cleaner-burning natural gas can play a significant role in reducing air pollution, we must not create new, equally serious problems.

With so much at stake for so many people, gas companies must put a high priority on public health. There's plenty of gas and money to go around without cutting corners. If fracking leads to a bad accident or pollution, drilling companies will suffer through the resulting curtailment of leasing and government scrutiny. Look what happened to BP and deepwater drillers after the Gulf of Mexico disaster or the nuclear industry after the Japan calamity.

Some consider environmental concerns to be anti-business. Nonsense. Ensuring the health and safety of our workers and families is good business and will lead to higher profits. Done right, the natural gas boom can be a big windfall for our economy. So drillers, get the fracks right, be honest about the chemicals you're using, and build good clean wells using the best technology available. You'll be amply rewarded.

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