

Poll: Fracking for Natural Gas Is No Longer Obscure

Mike Soraghan, New York Times, 12-22-10

Nearly 3 in 5 Americans -- 57 percent -- have at least some awareness of the once obscure drilling practice of hydraulic fracturing, according to a poll released today by the Civil Society Institute.

The institute, a nonpartisan Massachusetts think tank that advocates solutions to climate change, found that those who have heard of the process often called "fracking" are concerned that the process is not well regulated.

"Americans now understand that, especially with the allure of gas production from unconventional gas plays, even 'getting it right' from a technical and regulatory point of view might still be wrong in terms of clean drinking water," said Cornell University engineering professor Anthony Ingraffea, a critic of the fracturing process who joined the institute's press conference call to release the poll.

The survey (pdf) of 1,012 people conducted Nov. 26-28 by Infogroup/Opinion Research Corp. found that among those who are "very aware" or "somewhat aware," 69 percent are very or somewhat concerned about water quality issues.

The survey found such concern among members of both major political parties -- including 57 percent of Republicans, 74 percent of independents and 86 percent of Democrats.

Industry groups said the poll's questions preordained the answers and established a false choice between energy production and environmental protection.

"Natural gas is a clean, abundant and domestic energy source that holds vast potential to improve air quality, grow local economies and enhance energy security in the United States and, increasingly, around the world," said Dan Whitten of America's Natural Gas Alliance.

In the press call, Ingraffea and the institute's officials noted that in the public's mind, the specific process of "fracking" has become intertwined with drilling in general.

"When we use the word 'fracking,' we don't mean the one hour that fracking is taking place far underground," Ingraffea said. "It's really a placeholder for the whole process."

In fracturing, crews inject tanker-loads of water and sand underground to blow apart the rock and release gas. A small fraction of that concoction is a mixture of chemicals as mundane as ice cream thickener and as toxic as benzene.

When Congress exempted fracturing from the Safe Drinking Water Act in 2005, it attracted little attention because few had ever heard of it. But the increase in drilling in the more densely populated Northeast has raised awareness, along with the anti-drilling documentary "Gas Land." It has also been featured recently on the CBS news show "60 Minutes" and a full episode of the popular network television show "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation."

Improvements in fracturing technology have opened the vast shale formations in Pennsylvania and other states that were previously considered too difficult and expensive to tap.

But the rapid expansion of drilling and fracturing has intensified fears that the toxins and carcinogens in fracturing fluid might contaminate drinking water. Environmentalists and congressional Democrats have pushed not only for public disclosure of fracturing chemicals but also for stricter federal regulation of the practice.

Drilling companies, though, say fracturing is safe and existing state regulation is sufficient. They stress that the fracturing fluid is injected thousands of feet below drinking water aquifers and maintain that there has never been a proven case of groundwater contamination from the fracturing process.

Still, one drilling group said it should do more to get its message to people who live amid the drilling boom.

"One thing is clear: Our industry must continue to educate communities about the steps we're taking each day to protect and strengthen the environment while delivering clean-burning, job-creating energy to American consumers," said Kathryn Klaber, president of Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale Coalition.

With the Republican takeover of the U.S. House, legislation calling for increased federal regulation and disclosure is likely a non-starter. But the Obama administration is considering requiring drillers to disclose the chemicals they inject under public lands. And industry and states are looking at increased disclosure of fracturing fluids.

The institute's survey found that 19 percent of respondents described themselves as "very aware," 25 percent said they were "somewhat aware," and 13 percent were "not very aware," adding up to 57 percent. A minority said they are "not aware at all" about fracking concerns.

When compared to the 43 percent of Americans who are "very/somewhat" aware of fracking, 49 percent of Republicans and 47 percent of independents knew about the issue, contrasted with 39 percent of Democrats.

The pollsters looked more closely at Pennsylvania and New York. The New York survey (pdf) found that half of New York state residents were "very aware" (22 percent) or "somewhat aware" (28 percent) of fracking as a "water pollution issue." The numbers roughly reversed in New York City, where more than half (53 percent) of residents were unaware of fracking as an issue, with 38 percent "very aware" (16 percent) or "somewhat aware" (22 percent).

In Pennsylvania, where the Marcellus Shale drilling is most intense, the survey (pdf) found that 60 percent of respondents are aware of fracturing.