

# Gulf oil spill worsens -- but what about the safety of gas fracking?

**Margot Roosevelt, Los Angeles Times, 6-18-10**

Imagine a siege of hydrocarbons spewing from deep below ground, polluting water and air, sickening animals and threatening the health of unsuspecting Americans. And no one knows how long it will last.

No, we're not talking about BP's gulf oil spill. We're talking about hydraulic fracturing of natural gas deposits. And if that phrase makes your eyes glaze over, start blinking them open. Fracking, as the practice is also known, may be coming to a drinking well or a water system near you. It involves blasting water, sand and chemicals, many of them toxic, into underground rock to extract oil or gas.

"Gasland," a compelling documentary on HBO airing Monday, June 21 ( 9 p.m. ET/PT), traces hydraulic fracturing across 34 states from California to Louisiana to Pennsylvania. The exposé by filmmaker Josh Fox, alternately chilling and darkly humorous, won the 2010 Sundance Film Festival's special jury prize for documentary.

It details how former Vice President Dick Cheney, in partnership with the energy industry and drilling companies such as his former employer, Halliburton Corp., successfully pressured Congress in 2005 to exempt fracking from the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Clean Air Act and other environmental laws.

And it highlights the battle in Congress today over whether to repeal the provision that allows gas companies to conceal which chemicals they inject into the ground as "trade secrets." Each well requires the high-pressure injection of a cocktail of nearly 600 chemicals, including known carcinogens and neurotoxins, diluted in 1 million to 7 million gallons of water.

Some 450,000 wells have been drilled nationwide.

Coincidentally, a month before the blowout of the gulf oil well, Energy and Environment Daily, an independent publication, published a draft of proposed language to exempt fracking from chemical disclosure rules in pending Senate energy and climate legislation. The primary author? BP America Inc.

Fox's HBO film shows rural residents in Colorado and other states flicking on cigarette lighters next to their kitchen faucets and watching their drinking water, infused with gas and chemicals, ignite in flames as high as 3 feet. Fox interviews scores of residents suffering from neurological damage and other ailments after their water went bad.

Many said they were pressured by drilling companies into signing nondisclosure agreements in exchange for paltry settlements.

Policymakers often tout gas as a cleaner fuel than oil or coal, one that emits less pollution when burned, and thus a possible "bridge" to renewable energy. Gas companies say the fracking process is safe and has resulted in few contamination accidents. And they say that states have sufficient regulatory power over fracking, so federal oversight is unnecessary.

Gas companies are seeking drilling rights to the vast Marcellus Shale Field, dubbed "the Saudia Arabia of natural gas" below New York and Pennsylvania. But the field sits beneath the last unfiltered watershed in the U.S. serving tens of millions of residents of New York City, Philadelphia and the surrounding area. Fox, who grew up in rural Pennsylvania, was approached by a gas company to sell the rights under his family's land -- an offer that prompted his curiosity and ultimately his cross-country investigation, toting a banjo in his beat-up car and weaving his personal story through the documentary.

Contaminated drinking water isn't the only issue. In the Dallas-Fort Worth area, roughly 10,000 gas wells spew more pollution into the air than all the cars and trucks in the region, the film reports.

The Environmental Protection Agency in March announced it will conduct a comprehensive \$1.9-million peer-reviewed study on the "potential adverse impact that hydraulic fracturing may have on water quality and public health."

Meanwhile, although BP's oil spill has pushed other energy issues off the public radar, this HBO film, also showing on June 24, 26 and 30, and July 5, is a reminder that offshore drilling is not the only energy-related hazard worth thinking about.