

# Exaggerating the dangers of natural gas drilling

**John Stossel, Barstow Desert Dispatch, 5-18-11**

Stossel is host of “Stossel” on the Fox Business Network. He’s the author of “Give Me a Break” and of “Myth, Lies, and Downright Stupidity.”

I just learned I’m going to save money! My apartment building in New York will switch from heating oil to cleaner natural gas. Gas is much cheaper than oil now because energy companies found ways to get more of it out of the ground.

Even more astounding is that by using this technique, America won’t run out of natural gas for 100 years or more! Time to break out the Champagne?

Not so fast, say environmentalists. To get gas out of the ground, companies use pressurized chemicals to blow up rock. It’s called hydraulic fracturing — fracking. An Oscar-nominated movie, “Gasland,” says that fracking contaminates our water supply with chemicals. In the movie, some homeowners set their tap water on fire.

That got my attention. I’ve seen Michael Moore’s movies and environmental documentaries, which I thought were nonsense. But “Gasland” is more convincing.

Unfortunately, “Gasland” producer Josh Fox turned down my interview requests, as did representatives of the big national environmental groups that oppose fracking. I think I know why. The movie and the left’s arguments against fracking are deceitful.

First, the movie implies that nasty chemicals get into the water table. That seems logical, since they shoot them down into gas wells. But it turns out that the shale gas wells are thousands of feet below the water table. Do the chemicals flow up — against gravity?

But then what’s the explanation for the most dramatic part of the movie: tap water so laden with gas that people can set it on fire?

It turns out that has little to do with fracking. In many parts of America, there is enough methane in the ground to leak into people’s well water. The best fire scene in the movie was shot in Colorado, where the filmmaker is in the kitchen of a man who lights his faucet. But Colorado investigators went to that man’s house, checked out his well and found that fracking had nothing to do with his water catching fire. His well-digger had drilled into a naturally occurring methane pocket.

“There are lots of ... naturally causing effects that occur,” says Matthew Brouillette of the Commonwealth Foundation, a think tank in Pennsylvania — where much of the film was shot. “It’s really no surprise. We find that 40 percent of the wells in Pennsylvania have some sort of naturally occurring methane gas and other types of things.”

John Hanger, former director of Pennsylvania’s Department of Environmental Protection, who also appeared in the film, is less sanguine:

“Gas can migrate ... from poor drilling into people’s private water wells. ... We have had gas move from poorly done gas drilling through the ground and reach people’s water wells. So there is a need for oversight ... gas does

have some impacts. It is not perfectly clean. But compared to coal and oil, which are more dirty fossil fuels, natural gas can be produced and consumed in a manner that is cleaner than coal.”

Filmmaker Josh Fox concedes that the states concluded that the fire wasn't caused by fracking, but he says the government regulators collude with industry, or don't use good science. His movie portrays Hanger as an indifferent bureaucrat. Hanger says the movie is just inaccurate. “Josh Fox has a mission. ... He is trying to shut down the gas — drilling industry.”

Frankly, I'm skeptical of all of them: lefty moviemakers who smear companies, companies with economic interests at stake and the regulators, who are often cozy with industry and lack essential knowledge. The surest environmental protectors are property rights — and courts that assign liability to polluters.

But hydraulic fracturing is a wonderful thing. It's not new. Companies have done it for 60 years, but now they've found ways to get even more gas out of the ground. That's the reason gas is getting cheaper and panicky politicians no longer rant about America “running out of fuel.”

Natural gas is not risk-free, but no energy source is. Perfect is not one of the choices.