

Fact-checking fracking

Public and industry interests are both served by objective examination of the process.

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The Texas House of Representatives has done right by both the Texas economy and our state's environment by approving HB 3328 requiring oil and natural gas producers to disclose chemicals used in the hydraulic fracturing process commonly referred to as fracking. A similar bill, sponsored by state Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, is in the Texas Senate.

Fracking is the technology that has opened up new oil and gas reserves, including vast deposits across Texas, by the injection of chemicals into the shale formation to unlock the trapped oil and gas. While the process has been hailed as a game-changer by the industry, it has also raised concerns about the potential for contamination of water supplies. Those must be answered.

The House legislation would make that information public while preserving details of the chemical make-up of fracking fluids that many in the industry contend fall into the category of trade secrets. This seems a reasonable balancing of the public's right to know with drillers' proprietary interests.

We have supported expanded use of domestic natural gas reserves opened up by fracking as a clean-burning "bridge" fuel to bring the nation to eventual reliance on sustainable energy supplies from wind and solar and other renewables -but with adequate protection for the environment, particularly our water resources. By most estimates, the switch to renewables is several decades away.

Interest in fracking safety rightly extends to the federal level, where a U.S. House committee this week held hearings on a study of the widely used process proposed by the Environmental Protection Agency. In this setting, the tone of industry sometimes came across as skeptical, according to reporting by the Chronicle's Jennifer Dlouhy. Several Texans questioned EPA motives, imputing partisan politics to them.

We won't pick sides in that scrape. What we do believe is that an objective, science-based assessment of the potential environmental impacts of fracking is in both the public's and the industry's highest self-interest.

Anything less is unacceptable, and could even be a potential game-ender to many folks' hopes for expanded use of natural gas. That would be a loss for the nation and a serious economic blow for Texas.

Responsible regulation of fracking is nothing short of imperative. The industry would be wise to avoid even the appearance of attempting to sidestep or soften such oversight. That approach is a loser in the court of public opinion, where this ultimately will be decided.

Case in point? One need only look at the recent troubles of the Nuclear Regulatory agency, the federal watchdog of the nuclear power industry, which has been called out for lax enforcement of safety standards at nuclear plants. These alleged lapses have called into question the entire future of that industry as a player in the electric power arena.

Given that political drama, we welcome the news that University of Texas geologists will be studying fracking with the specific objective to "inject more science into the debate, so that policymakers have a sound foundation upon which to develop appropriate rules and regulations," according to UT geologist Chip Groat.

We like the idea — and the credentials Groat brings to the project. He's a former head of the U.S. Geological Survey in both the Clinton and second Bush administrations.

We also like notion of lots of Texas eyes on this process.