

Fracture on Fracking

John M. Broder, New York Times, 5-7-11

Secretary of Energy Steven Chu has appointed a panel of seven scientific and environmental worthies to study the rapidly growing method of natural gas extraction known as hydraulic fracturing and to make recommendations about how it can be done more cleanly and more safely.

The group includes John Deutch, a former Central Intelligence Agency director; Kathleen McGinty, a former top White House environmental adviser; and Daniel Yergin, probably the best-known oil industry analyst in the country.

Dr. Chu announced his decision late Thursday. This being Washington, House Republicans immediately issued a press release denouncing the study as wasteful, duplicative and yet another example of regulatory red tape run amok.

On the other side of the Capitol, Senator Richard Burr, Republican of North Carolina, went them one better, introducing a bill to dismantle the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency.

The bill would combine them into one streamlined agency that would presumably spend less time and money hassling gas drillers, power plant operators and other job creators.

Secretary Chu, a Nobel laureate in physics, said that he was acting at the direction of President Obama, who outlined a new energy strategy last month that calls for more domestic oil and gas production but also new rules to make the business safer. Hydraulic fracturing, popularly known as fracking, uses high-pressure injection of fluids into underground shale formations to unleash natural gas pockets.

The technique, which has been in limited use for decades, is expected to significantly increase recovery of domestic gas supplies and keep prices moderate for years.

But the practice also pours millions of gallons of dangerous chemicals into the ground and into wastewater treatment systems, which in some cases cannot remove all the potential toxins. There are also numerous documented cases of fracking fluids' leaking into underground aquifers that provide drinking water.

Dr. Chu named seven members to the study group and gave them 90 days to come up with immediate recommendations to improve the safety of fracking and six months to provide consensus advice to state and federal regulatory agencies to ensure protection of public health and the environment.

“America’s vast natural gas resources can generate many new jobs and provide significant environmental benefits, but we need to ensure we harness these resources safely,” Dr. Chu said in a press release. “I am looking forward to hearing from this diverse, respected group of experts on best practices for safe and responsible natural gas production.”

Three hours later, Representative Fred Upton, Republican of Michigan and chairman of the House Energy and Commerce committee, put out a statement denouncing the new panel’s work, saying that the E.P.A. already has authority to study and regulate the issue.

The Department of Interior has authority over oil and gas development on public lands and waters, Mr. Upton noted, “and now the Department of Energy is getting in on the action. Adding another study to the mix will do little to prove anything and only serve to waste more government resources.”

Mr. Upton said that fracking had been used safely for more than 60 years and there are “too many cooks in the kitchen” when it comes to regulating the nation’s natural resources.

So also says Senator Burr. In his release on Thursday calling for the merger of the Department of Energy and the E.P.A., he contended that a “super-agency” would retain the core functions of the two disbanded departments but would cut what he called ineffective and redundant programs. The move would save more than \$3 billion in 2012 alone, he said.

“The amount of money wasted annually on duplicative programs within the federal government is staggering,” Mr. Burr said. “This common sense approach will reduce duplicative and wasteful functions across these two agencies and streamline our approach to a comprehensive, coordinated energy and environmental policy.”

Here are the members of the Department of Energy’s new hydraulic fracturing study group, with bios provided by the Department of Energy:

John Deutch, institute professor at M.I.T. (chairman) -- Deutch served as director of energy research, acting assistant secretary for energy technology and undersecretary of Energy for the Department of Energy in the Carter administration and undersecretary of acquisition and technology, deputy secretary of defense and director of Central Intelligence during the first Clinton administration. Dr. Deutch also currently serves on the board of directors of Raytheon and Cheniere Energy and is a past director of Citigroup, Cummins Engine Company and Schlumberger. A chemist who has published more than 140 technical papers in physical chemistry, he has been a member of the M.I.T. faculty since 1970 and has served as chairman of the department of chemistry, dean of science and provost.

Stephen Holditch, head of the department of petroleum engineering, Texas A&M University -- Holditch serves as head of Texas A&M’s Harold Vance Department of Petroleum Engineering and serves on the boards of directors of Triangle Petroleum Corporation and Matador Resources Corporation Texas. In 1977, Dr. Holditch founded S.A. Holditch & Associates, a petroleum technology consulting firm that provided analysis of low permeability gas reservoirs and designed hydraulic fracture treatments. He served as president of the company until it was bought by Schlumberger in 1997. Dr. Holditch has worked for Schlumberger, Shell Oil Company and Pan American Petroleum Corporation.

Fred Krupp, president, Environmental Defense Fund -- Krupp has overseen the growth of E.D.F. into a recognized worldwide leader in the environmental movement. Mr. Krupp is widely acknowledged as the foremost champion of harnessing market forces for environmental ends. He also helped introduce a corporate coalition, the United States Climate Action Partnership, whose Fortune 500 members – Alcoa, General Electric, DuPont and dozens more – have called for strict limits on global warming pollution. Mr. Krupp is co-author, with Miriam Horn, of the New York Times best seller, “Earth: The Sequel.” Educated at Yale and the University of Michigan Law School, Mr. Krupp was among 16 people named as America’s Best Leaders by U.S. News & World Report in 2007.

Kathleen McGinty, former secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection -- McGinty is a respected environmental leader, having served as President Clinton’s chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality and legislative assistant and environment adviser to then-Senator Al Gore. More recently, she served as secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and as chair of the Pennsylvania Energy Development Authority. Ms. McGinty is senior vice president of Weston Solutions and a director at NRG Energy.

Susan Tierney, managing principal, Analysis Group -- Tierney is chairman of the Board of the Energy Foundation and serves on the boards of directors of the World Resources Institute and the Clean Air Task Force. Until recently she was a co-chair of the National Commission on Energy Policy. Currently she chairs the National Petroleum Council Policy Subgroup's study of North American natural gas and oil resources. Dr. Tierney served as assistant secretary for policy at the Department of Energy during the Clinton administration. In Massachusetts, she served as secretary of environmental affairs, chair of the Board of the Massachusetts Water Resources Agency, commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities and executive director of the Massachusetts Energy Facilities Siting Council.

Daniel Yergin, chairman, IHS Cambridge Energy Research Associates -- Yergin is the co-founder and chairman of IHS Cambridge Energy Research Associates. He is a member of the board of the United States Energy Association and a member of the National Petroleum Council. He has chaired the Department of Energy's task Force on strategic energy research and development. Dr. Yergin is also CNBC's global energy expert and the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book "The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power."

Mark Zoback, Professor of Geophysics, Stanford University -- Zoback is the Benjamin M. Page professor of geophysics at Stanford University. He was co-principal investigator of the San Andreas Fault Observatory at Depth project (Safod) and has been serving on a National Academy of Engineering committee investigating the Deepwater Horizon accident. He was the chairman and co-founder of GeoMechanics International and serves as a senior adviser to Baker Hughes Inc. Prior to joining Stanford University, he served as chief of the tectonophysics branch of the United States Geological Survey's earthquake hazards reduction program.