

# Sapping the sweet spots: How long will US energy boom last?

**Peter Moskowitz, Aljazeera America, 11-10-14**

In his 2012 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama said that the U.S. had a supply of natural gas “that can last America nearly 100 years.”

But that unbridled optimism, shared by the natural gas industry as well as politicians who want to see the U.S. become more energy independent, is worrying a growing group of activists and analysts who say U.S. oil and gas production may start declining in a matter of years as drillers run out of sweet spots in U.S. shale reserves and are forced to explore less productive — and less lucrative — regions.

“Most of the wells right now are going into sweet spots,” said David Hughes, who authored a report released this week on the future of oil and gas production from the Post Carbon Institute, a green energy think tank. “You’re going to have to go into other parts of the reservoir eventually.”

He says more pessimistic observations have for years been swept under the rug, as the recent flood of untapped oil and gas made accessible by newly popularized technologies like hydraulic fracturing has buoyed the spirits of fossil fuel optimists. These optimists believe the U.S. oil and gas boom could create hundreds of thousands more jobs, cut dependence on foreign oil and even use U.S. energy sources to leverage power in diplomatic battles — as long as the country manages to keep producing gas and oil at the current rate for decades to come.

Their claims have been bolstered by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), a part of the Department of Energy tasked with analyzing and predicting energy trends. Most of the EIA’s reports see a bright future for oil and gas, especially shale gas and shale oil, otherwise known as tight oil. The agency predicts U.S. reserves will last for decades more.

Those rosy predictions have the potential to seriously affect U.S. policy and economics. In recent years, there has been a push to end the United States’ oil export ban so producers can sell domestic oil to Europe and Asia. Furthermore, companies have spent billions building out a network of pipelines and gas export plants that makes financial sense only if the natural gas boom continues, and the Obama administration has centered its energy policy on the idea that natural gas will remain cheap and abundant for years.

But the relentless upbeat nature of the U.S. government’s predictions may mask a more complicated truth about oil and gas development. No one knows exactly how much oil and gas will be accessible in the future, and some people say it’s a lot less than what the government and industry think.

The Post Carbon Institute report suggests that while the U.S. does have a lot of shale oil and gas, the majority of it may be too deep and too expensive to drill.

The report is based on an analysis of the productivity of thousands of wells in the most productive U.S. shale regions. Shale is a kind of rock that can hold oil and gas and can be broken up through a variety of methods. One of the most popular, hydraulic fracturing (also known as fracking), involves blasting a mixture of sand, water and chemicals thousands of feet into the ground to break up the rock and force the oil and gas in it to the surface. Shale oil and gas is responsible for ushering a new era of energy development in the U.S., catapulting the country to becoming the world's biggest oil and gas producer in just a matter of years.

But Hughes says that revolution could come to a grinding halt.