

Californians targets of activist misinformation on fracking, water use: Guest commentary

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Californians have been subjected to great deal of misinformation about the well-understood and time-tested oil and gas well stimulation technique known as hydraulic fracturing or “fracking.” This misinformation has come mostly from a cadre of extremist national and affiliated local environmental groups, whose ultimate goal is to ban not just fracking but all oil and gas development in California — the third largest consumer of gas and diesel in the world.

No issue is of greater importance in California at the moment than water, and it is on this issue that anti-industry activists have made their most concerted efforts to scare Californians with objective falsehoods.

It is a basic fact that hydraulic fracturing in California, owing to our unique geology, uses an average of less than 130,000 gallons of water per fracture. This is a far cry from the 4 million gallons claimed in a recent commentary. In fact, all of the fracking done in California in 2013 used only 303 acre-feet of water, about the same amount of water needed to keep only two golf courses green. Californians use nearly 9 million acre-feet of water per year keeping their own lawns green. Fracking, it should be noted, is not an ongoing process (contrary to those who try to scare you with talk of “fracking wells”) but a single event that takes at most a few days.

The other water-related issue that anti-industry activists fail to understand — or fail to be honest about — is that oil production is mostly water production. Billions of barrels of non-potable water are brought from deep underground and from that water is separated relatively small amounts of oil. In 2012, for example, 3 billion barrels of water came from the ground with only 197 million barrels of oil.

This is water that was not “used up” in the process; it is non-potable water that was never part of the water cycle to begin with. This water is treated and then either used for enhanced oil recovery operations like water flooding and steam injection, reinjected back into the formation to balance pressure (cleaner than when it came out), or sold to the agriculture industry to use for much-needed crop irrigation. It would probably surprise most ordinary Californians that in parts of the state the oil industry is a net producer of valuable and usable water rather than a consumer.

The other method of disposing of produced water is to put it into “Class II” injection wells. These wells are used by many industries to dispose of water — there is nothing different about wells used by the oil and gas industry — and both fracked and unfracked wells produce non-potable water that is disposed of in one of the ways listed above. In other states, regulators are reviewing whether Class II injection wells induce small seismic events, but activists have made much of minor earthquake activity linked to these wells in states that don’t have the experience that California has with seismicity. It is because of California’s deep understanding of our geology, which includes much more faulting than found elsewhere in the country, that the industry and regulators understand the issues involved so well and have avoided seismic issues. This is why there has never, according to the Department of Conservation, been a seismic event

triggered by an injection well in our state, let alone by fracking which, as Stanford geophysicist Mark Zoback pointed out to the U.S. Senate, releases, on average, as much energy “as a gallon of milk falling off a kitchen counter.” In any event, produced water injection is not in any way “fracking.”

We are in the midst of a historic drought, and every person and every industry — including the oil and gas industry — has a role to play in adapting to these conditions. Misleading or dishonest claims about any industry on an important issue like water conservation during a drought are, at best, irresponsible. To use these untruths as a means to shut down the nation’s third largest oil producer, which has the strictest environmental safeguards in the country, and the much-needed jobs, state revenue and related economic activity it provides, it does a disservice to all Californians.