

Hard to find fault in fracking

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An audience of almost 500 – comprised of concerned citizens, activists and candidates for city and county office – gathered at Cal State Fullerton on Tuesday for a symposium on hydraulic fracturing, commonly known as fracking.

The symposium was led by a diverse panel, made up of a combination of geologists, environmental consultants, state employees and industry representatives. Their goal was to give an impartial analysis of the many aspects of fracking as a practice: How it is performed, what the effects on water and air quality have been, where in California it is being done and whether residents should be concerned.

Orange County residents were watching closely, knowing that California's Monterey Shale extends under some land in north county and provides economic incentives for the drilling practice.

The process of fracking, explained Dr. Steve Bohlen of the California Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources, is meant to "circumvent" the natural process of retrieving hydrocarbons from buried source rock. It does this by injecting a fluid that is 99.5 percent water and sand, according to environmental consultant and Brea resident Mark Zeko, with the rest being made up of various chemicals that assist in holding the fractures open.

These chemicals have been the focus of concerns, but the panel suggested that the risk of contamination was low. Mr. Zeko cited a 2009 incident in Kern County, where 96 million barrels worth of wastewater leached into a farmer's property, but noted that the incident resulted from a practice of holding wastewater in large, on-site pits – something that law now prohibits. Wastewater must be contained in large barrels.

The California Council on Science and Technology, a state-established, nonpartisan research organization, also released a report in August saying that no risk of contamination could be found. And while the report suffered from some gaps in data, it added to the chorus of affirmations on display Tuesday.

Orange County residents were concerned because of fracking being done in the Brea-Olinda field by LINN Energy, which has drilled 19 producing wells since acquiring rights to the land in 2006, according to Trent Rosenlieb.

These wells are vertical, as opposed to horizontal, meaning they go deeper into the ground and are therefore farther away from groundwater stores. There is also less water pumped underground in California, reducing the risk of earthquake aggravation.

What we learned, by night's end, is that the notoriety of fracking is largely undeserved. The practice, now regulated under Senate Bill 4, which passed in 2013, is being closely monitored by private and public bodies. It has the potential to be a great economic boon to the county, the state and the country as a whole. Events like those on Tuesday should continue to alleviate fears.

