

# Fracking -- New York, California and the perils of ignoring science

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California and New York are often viewed as outliers -- large, influential and politically liberal states that can be either bellwethers for public policy or objects of bemusement.

Recent developments in the debate over hydraulic fracturing (fracking), however, show that these two states have fundamentally opposite approaches to leadership from Democratic governors.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York didn't lead, but rather followed when his Health Commissioner announced that the state would continue its ban on fracking. This despite the fact that the state's Department of Health couldn't find evidence that fracking is harmful.

While this is unfortunate for the New Yorkers who would have benefitted from the jobs and economic activity provided by the state's natural gas resources, it could be seen as a boon for neighboring states such as Pennsylvania, which now are assured of the opportunity to produce not only their own energy, but some of New York's as well.

A stronger barometer of sound energy policy among progressive leaders is California Gov. Jerry Brown, who has followed the scientific consensus on fracking to its logical conclusion.

California, the nation's third-largest energy producing state, has had a robust debate about hydraulic fracturing for the past several years. Because fracking has been happening safely in California since Dwight Eisenhower was president, there was no reason to act rashly.

State officials moved deliberately, holding dozens of public hearings and looking carefully at the abundant scientific literature.

Fracking bans were defeated handily in the state's overwhelmingly Democratic legislature. Rather than giving in to a very vocal but scientifically challenged portion of his party's base, the governor and legislature supported SB 4, a sweeping piece of legislation that strictly regulates fracking and other well-stimulation techniques. Senate Bill 4 will be fully implemented in July.

Not pleased with getting almost everything they previously said they wanted -- including chemical disclosure, pre-notification, water testing and well integrity testing -- activists now are trying to convince policymakers that New York's example justifies a California fracking ban.

These activists refuse to acknowledge that government regulators and academic experts have repeatedly said that hydraulic fracturing is a safe process with manageable risks. A 2012 study of the Inglewood Oil Field near Los Angeles, the largest urban oil field in the United States, came to the same conclusion. New York acted contrary to the overwhelming scientific consensus, and in its report cited only "potential" for harm, without identifying actual harm caused by this routine and well-understood 65-year-old well completion technique.

A fracking ban in California would be nonsensical. As one of the country's major energy producers as well as the third-largest consumer of gas and diesel on the planet, California has to use oil even as it slowly decreases in importance in our overall energy mix. That oil will have to come from somewhere.

A ban on fracking would only lead to higher global carbon emissions, as the state would import more oil by rail and ship from countries with more lax environmental regulations. It would add to unemployment in the state's most economically troubled region as well as less revenue to fund vital state programs.

When it comes to proven and economically stimulating energy development, New York has nothing to teach California.