

State science panel assesses fracking risks

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The recent multivolume report by the California Council on Science & Technology offers a classic glass-half-empty or glass-half-full choice for people interested in energy production.

For those in the oil industry – or who value energy independence and domestic production – the council’s report provides validation that we are doing things right in California. After decades of using hydraulic fracturing and other oil production technologies under some of the most stringent regulations in the world, the council was unable to find any evidence these technologies have harmed the environment.

For those opposing hydraulic fracturing, the report provided a wealth of information about potential risks, data gaps and recommendations for more regulation. A Los Angeles Times headline said it all: “California science panel warns that fracking poses unknown risk.”

What human activity does not pose unknown risk? And what exactly is an unknown risk?

A more productive exercise involves assessing known risks associated with industrial activities and making sure we are managing those risks properly. Here are the science-based findings of the council’s study:

- No evidence fracking has harmed the environment.
- No evidence fracking has contaminated groundwater.
- Fracking is not likely to cause earthquakes of concern.
- The amount of freshwater used in hydraulic fracturing is small compared to other human uses.

These findings are not a surprise. California has embarked on an impressive expansion of regulatory oversight and supervision of oil production activities, adopting the most sweeping and stringent regulations on fracking and oil production activities in the country – if not in the world.

In 2013, the Legislature adopted Senate Bill 4 by Sen. Fran Pavley, requiring:

- Oil companies to obtain separate permits for fracking in addition to other permits required to drill a well and produce oil.
- Prior notification to surrounding landowners.
- Mandatory disclosure of all chemicals used in fracturing fluid.
- Well-integrity testing before and after fracturing.
- Extensive testing and monitoring of nearby groundwater.
- Monitoring and reporting of seismic activity.
- Development of a statewide environmental impact report with extensive mitigation measures.

- Independent, science-based study of hydraulic fracturing.

This last requirement was fulfilled by the council's report. Also required by SB 4 were extensive new groundwater monitoring rules, which were recently adopted by the State Water Resources Control Board.

Progress is clearly being made. Senate Bill 1281 was adopted last year and requires oil producers to provide the state extensive new information on water supplies, use and disposition.

SB 4 and SB 1281 require an unprecedented, but welcome, amount of information to be reported to the state. There is so much data flooding in now that regulatory agencies are being overwhelmed. The oil industry supported budget language that provides for:

- 23 new positions and \$3.5 million for the Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources.
- 19 new positions at the water board and \$2.9 million to enforce water standards.
- 21 new positions and \$10 million for the Department of Conservation to manage the massive volume of data.
- \$625,000 for the Department of Water Resources to improve public access to oil production information.

The recent report on hydraulic fracturing identified several areas where the council felt more data were needed. Much of that information is now flooding into state offices.

We understand there are those who will say this is not enough, that more regulations are needed or that fracking should be banned – no matter how many studies fail to find harm.

But Californians who care about their water, environment and access to reliable and affordable energy can be confident we have met and are exceeding our reputations as environmental leaders.