



Image by Matt Rourke, AP

## Environmental Groups Have Lost the War Against Fracking

By Steve Goreham

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Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a technique to remove natural gas and oil from shale formations, has been under withering assault from environmental groups for much of the last decade. Fracking has been blamed for contamination of drinking water, air pollution, earthquakes, water shortages, global warming, radiation discharge, and even cancer. But it appears that environmentalists have lost the war against fracking.

Environmental groups have been almost unanimously opposed to hydraulic fracturing. Greenpeace and the Sierra Club favor outright bans, and other organizations call for tight controls on the process. According to the Sierra Club [website](#), “Fracking, a violent process that dislodges gas deposits from shale rock formations, is known to contaminate drinking water, pollute the air, and cause earthquakes. If drillers can’t extract natural gas without destroying landscapes and endangering the health of families, then we should not drill for natural gas.”

But the case against hydraulic fracturing is weak. Shale is typically fractured at depths greater than 5,000 feet, with thousands of feet of rock between the fractured area and the water table, which is located near the surface. When properly designed, fracking wells are lined with multiple layers of steel and cement casing to prevent leakage of water and natural gas into the local water supply. Approximately one million wells have been hydraulically fractured over the last six decades without cases of water contamination. During Congressional testimony in 2011, Environmental Protection Agency administrator Lisa Jackson [stated](#), “I am not aware of any proven case where the fracking process itself has affected water, although there are investigations ongoing.”

Earthquakes caused by hydraulic fracturing appear to be minimal. Only a handful of micro quakes have been [linked](#) to fractured wells. None of these quakes have caused damage and

most are too weak to feel. Nor is there evidence to show that fracking poses greater air pollution, radiation discharge, or cancer impact than agriculture, other mining, or other common industrial processes.

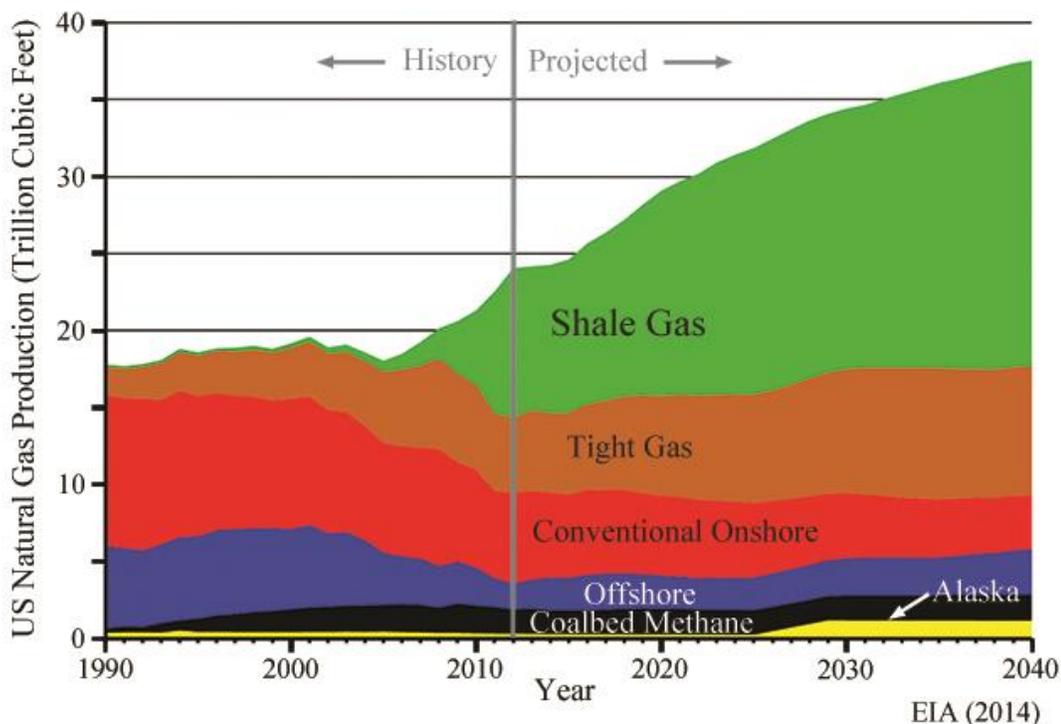
Burning natural gas releases carbon dioxide, like any other combustion. Climate activists oppose natural gas as a planet-warming fossil fuel and therefore oppose fracking. But gas combustion releases about half the carbon dioxide of coal combustion. The majority of the decline in US carbon dioxide emissions over the last ten years is due to the switch of electric utilities from coal to natural gas fuel, not from the growth of renewables.

Arguments about pollution of drinking water, earthquakes, water usage, radiation, and cancer appear to be a smoke screen to protect renewable energy, the sacred cow of the environmental movement. Natural gas from hydraulic fracturing is a direct threat to the growth of wind and solar energy.

Gas-fueled power plants are low-cost and dispatchable. In contrast, wind and solar electricity is two to three times the price and plagued by intermittent output, unable to respond to varying electrical demand. With hundreds of years of natural gas available from hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling techniques, why build another wind turbine?

Fracking [opposition](#) has been strong in isolated locations across the world. Bans or moratoriums are in place in Bulgaria, France, Germany, and South Africa. Protesters are blocking fracking operations in England and Poland. Selected US counties and communities have imposed fracking bans. The state of New York [established](#) a fracking moratorium in 2008 and has delayed approval of fracking for more than five years. Ironically, natural gas provides a growing majority of New York's energy consumption.

## Projected Growth of US Shale Gas Production



Despite the opposition, it appears that environmental groups have lost the war against fracking. In 2012, 40 percent of US natural gas [production](#) was shale gas, using fracking technology, up from less than one percent in 2000. Shale gas is projected to exceed 50 percent of production by 2040. US crude oil production is also surging due to oil recovered from shale fields, up more than 50 percent since 2005.

In Europe, concerns about energy dependency on Russia have triggered a turnaround of government opposition to fracking. Germany is [preparing](#) a framework for tapping oil and gas by hydraulic fracturing and planning to lift its ban. The British government is [proposing](#) policies to remove roadblocks from fracking efforts.

The Obama administration, despite its campaign to fight climate change, publically supports hydraulic fracturing and liquefied natural gas exports. Climate hawks, such as Senator Mark Udall of Colorado, also [support](#) the expansion of natural gas, to the dismay of green organizations. Governor Jerry Brown of California [presses](#) for action on climate change, but has not opposed hydraulic fracturing.

Today, hydraulic fracturing is [underway](#) in 21 states. Several more states are developing supporting regulations. Despite a number of local bans, fracking is now a frequently used industrial process across the nation.

Shale gas and oil are here to stay. Weak environmental arguments to ban fracking are being overwhelmed by the irresistible economic bonanza of low-cost energy.

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