

UK to expand fracking despite pollution and safety concerns

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The UK parliament recently approved an amendment to trespassing laws, which prevents landowners objecting to private companies accessing shale gas deposits, via fracking, below their homes.

Fracking extraction technology involves pumping water at high pressure into shale beds to release trapped gas, to be used as energy. Fracking firms will now automatically be allowed to carry on their activities 300 metres or more below a property without having any legal obligation to notify the homeowner or provide compensation.

The Department of Energy and Climate Change said, “It is essential that we make the most of home-sourced energy and start exploring the natural energy supplies beneath our feet ... By removing barriers to deep underground drilling access, we are speeding up oil and gas and deep geothermal energy exploration.”

The chief executive of the industry’s trade body, UK Onshore Oil and Gas (UKOOG), Ken Cronin, added gleefully, “This is an important day for the future of energy supply in the UK.”

“Landowners on the surface will not notice this underground activity and it will have no impact on their day-to-day lives,” he claimed.

More than 40,000 objections to the new proposals have been lodged during the consultation process. The measure violates centuries-old democratic rights. In 1760, in arguing for a bill that would protect individuals against unreasonable searches and seizures, Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder defended the sovereignty of the individual against an intrusive state. He said, “The poorest man may, in his cottage, bid defiance to all the forces of the Crown. It may be frail; its roof may shake; the wind may blow through it; the storm may enter; the rain may enter; but the King of England may not enter; all his force dares not cross the

threshold of the ruined tenement.”

The benefits of fracking remain highly questionable. The business case is based purely on estimates, without any real data to extrapolate from in terms of the “exploitability” of the gas “in place”. Moreover, the rush to make fracking easier comes as research calls into question the benefits in terms of reducing greenhouse gases and suggests the technique is much more polluting than previously recognised.

Recent reports from tests carried out by the US Environmental Agency around existing wells in production raise significant health concerns for people living within their proximity. They found levels of eight volatile chemicals violating federal guidelines, under several operational circumstances. Benzene, Formaldehyde and Hydrogen Sulphide were the most common compounds to exceed acute and other health-based risks.

This follows research reported in the *New Scientist* last year by the US National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR).

NCAR’s Tom Wigley concluded that substituting gas for coal increases, rather than decreases, the rate of warming for many decades. “Firstly, burning coal releases a lot of sulphur dioxide and black carbon. These cool the climate, offsetting up to 40 percent of the warming effect of burning coal,” Wigley said.

The fracking process also leaks methane, a much more potent greenhouse gas than CO₂, into the atmosphere. Wigley said that switching from coal to gas could only bring benefits this century if methane leakage rates get below 2 percent. If rates are at 10 percent—the top-end of current US estimates—the gas would deliver extra warming until the mid-22nd century.

In June 2012, the UK’s Royal Society issued its final

report on the environmental impacts of fracking. Its conclusion was the risk of increased seismic activity (tremors and earthquakes) and water/air pollution was “very minor” if correct regulations and safety protocols and procedures were adhered to. It noted positively, “The UK has 60 years experience of regulating onshore and offshore oil and gas industries.”

However, one only has to lift the lid slightly on the UK’s safety record in the oil and gas industries to see just how effective these “regulations” have been. Major disasters have taken many lives, including the 1965 Sea Gem platform collapse in the North Sea that led to 13 fatalities. In 1988, 167 men died in the worst deep sea oil disaster ever recorded at the Piper Alpha platform in the North Sea. In 2010, BP’s Deep Water Horizon Oil Disaster claimed 11 lives and caused untold environmental and economic damage to the Gulf of Mexico region. Many incidents involving smaller number of fatalities have been recorded.

In April 2012, another relaxation of safety regulations was granted to private operators, despite this being at the height of a gas leak crisis at the Elgin platform in the North Sea. The Health and Safety Executive introduced a new regulation stipulating that injuries need only be reported if workers are out of action for over seven days, instead of the previous three days.

Despite ongoing concerns for human health as a result of fracking, the UK government insists on opening up as much land as possible to private companies. Some estimates claim that 60 percent of the UK has been approved for further exploration.

In December 2013, the Department for Environmental Health issued a report citing a British Geological Society survey claiming that the Bowland Shale of the Pennine Basin (a substantial portion of central Britain) had an estimated 1,300 trillion cubic feet of “gas in place”. Other large areas of the UK were similarly listed as being of prime potential. However, the report was forced to concede, “Little drilling or testing has taken place in Britain’s shale deposits, so it is not yet possible to estimate how much shale gas or oil may be practically and commercially recoverable.”.

Despite the government’s trumpeting of “potentiality” and “community benefits,” there are deep-rooted concerns in the UK and internationally about the safety of such operations. This has found

expression in numerous anti-fracking protest movements.

On October 16, an independent panel issued their inquiry results into the police tactics and actions during protests at Barton Moss in northwest England earlier in 2014. It was conducted by the Independent Police Complaints Commission. The Terrorism Act 2000 was used as a pretext by Greater Manchester Police to raid the camp on January 6. Police searched it under Section 43 of the Act, claiming they were acting in response to a flare fired from the camp at a police helicopter.

The inquiry report noted that no evidence was produced to substantiate police claims. The cameras on the helicopter did not record the incident, neither did cameras at the airport, at Barton Moss Secure Centre, at the fracking firms’ site or the nearby motorway.

Under the new laws, the public will be given just 14 days from the formal notification of a planned site to submit any considerations or objections. If an exploratory license is granted, the local community will receive just £100,000. At production stage, this payment will convert into one percent of revenues made, which is expected to deliver just £5-10 million to the local community over the entire 25-year life of a site. In contrast, Deloitte UK analysis found that “Bowland Basin shale gas production could generate tax revenues of around £580 million per annum by 2020.”

The total revenues are expected to be in the billions for private investors, who will reap vast profits whatever the expense to humanity.



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