

UK government rips up restrictions on fracking

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The UK government decision to allow fracking in and around Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), places designated by law for the protection of rare species and habitats, once again confirms that big business and its representatives will allow nothing to stand in the way of the drive to exploit all unconventional oil and gas reserves.

In making this decision, the government has reneged on its pledge (made in January this year) of an “outright ban” on fracking inside SSSIs. Considerations of human health and safety, the environment and scientific interest do not enter the equation.

Hydraulic fracturing (fracking) is used to extract oil and natural gas trapped in shale deposits that are otherwise difficult to exploit. It involves drilling not only vertically but also horizontally. Drilling along the shale bed is followed by the injection of large quantities of highly pressurized water, laced with a cocktail of toxic and carcinogenic chemicals, plus sand. This fractures and holds open fissures in the rock from which the hydrocarbon material (gas and oil) can then escape and be extracted.

Fracking will even be allowed in national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty—so long as the rigs are located outside, and horizontal drilling is used to reach the reserves. Even protected groundwater source areas, where drinking water collects, are not to be exempt from this, despite the known risk of contamination with toxic chemicals.

The government is sending a strong signal to the fracking industry that its interests will prevail over all others, and that regulation will be kept to a minimum.

Above all, the government is seeking to ensure that British capitalism does not fall behind its competitors in the global competition for energy. As Prime Minister David Cameron commented in the *Telegraph*, “Without

it [fracking], we could lose ground in the tough global race”.

While the current low price of oil and gas makes fracking less attractive economically, removing or watering down environmental protection and safety, coupled with attacks on energy workers’ pay and conditions, are meant to ensure a profit can still be made.

The publication of a report by the UK-based CHEM Trust in June, on the dangers of chemical pollution from fracking, provides an important balance sheet on the experiences with fracking made in the last 20 years.

The report details the safety and health implications of the chemicals used in fracking and calls for an EU-wide moratorium until regulatory reform has been undertaken.

The executive summary contains a number of recommendations including:

- National parks, areas of natural beauty and wildlife interest need to be protected from disturbance by fracking operations.
- The vulnerability of groundwater to pollution from fracking should be recognised and there should be no operations near drinking water aquifers.

Specifically, the report states: “Fracking company Cuadrilla has drilled exploratory wells in Lancashire and there are fears that if fracking goes ahead it could harm wildlife in the River Wyre estuary, a site of special scientific interest (SSSI) which is only a few kilometres away.”

Pointing out the danger to workers in the industry, as well as the wider public, the report states: “Heavy metals like lead and arsenic, which are found in flowback, also affect fertility and are associated with a greater risk of miscarriage or stillbirth.”

In addition to the risks caused by the chemicals used,

fracking is also linked to increased seismic activity. A magnitude 2.3 earthquake occurred on April 1, 2011, followed by a magnitude 1.5 quake on May 27, 2011, close to the Preese Hall drilling site. Here, the biggest UK fracking company, Cuadrilla Resources, had been seeking to extract natural gas.

The report cites evidence showing the health and environmental dangers from fracking, including:

- A higher incidence of skin conditions and upper respiratory problems in communities living close to fracking operations;
- health problems, including coughs, tight chests, rashes, difficulty sleeping, joint pains, muscle pains, nausea and vomiting, for those living close to fracking operations;
- workers at fracking sites facing potential explosions, exposure to the hydrocarbons and other chemicals in fracking fluid, including biocides, and exposure to silica, which is linked to serious illness, including lung cancer.

According to the report, a large number of pollution incidents in the United States have been due to leaks from failure or inadequacy of well casings, “which has allowed methane and fracking chemicals to migrate into groundwater, drinking water or nearby properties, sometimes causing explosions, evacuations and necessitating the replacement of water supplies.”

Long experience of fracking in the US has shown that the industry does not bring the large numbers of stable jobs that its promoters claim. Rather, the fracking operations often last only a year or two and then move on, leaving health dangers and environmental degradation behind them.

It is clear that the British government is prepared to ignore such findings and ride roughshod over even minimal health and safety requirements in the drive to make fracking more profitable.

The most vocal opposition to fracking in the UK comes from the Green Party and various single-issue groups who seek to channel workers’ hostility to the dangers of fracking into the dead end of “pressure politics”.

When fracking applications by Cuadrilla in Lancashire at Preston New Road and Roseacre Wood (between Preston and Blackpool) were recently rejected by Lancashire County Council (LCC), Green Party MP Caroline Lucas said the decision “proves that, in spite

of all the government’s efforts to force through fracking, local communities can prevent it from going ahead”.

While Cuadrilla has been prevented from proceeding with its fracking operations in Lancashire, the setback is only temporary; the company was given the right to appeal the decision.

The *Independent* noted after the decision, “Industry sources indicated that while the Lancashire decision sets an important precedent, there will still be some applications for permission to frack elsewhere.”

New laws being developed by the Tory government are aimed at removing planning decisions from local councils affecting the use of land. Initially, this is being presented as a way of ensuring more homes are built by cutting “red tape”. But Conservative business secretary Sajid Javid has made clear that this is part of the government’s intention to “boost productivity”. In plain English, this means opening up further areas for exploitation by the major corporations.

Safe and clean energy is a basic right for all. While the major energy corporations remain in private hands—something the Green Party does not oppose—environmental and safety concerns will remain subordinate to the drive for profits for their owners and shareholders. *The author also recommends:* UK to expand fracking despite pollution and safety concerns.



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