

UK government opens vast areas to fracking firms

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4 January 2016

Fracking firms have been handed significant victories by the Conservative government in their quest to reap billions in profits from the UK's untapped and potentially vast shale gas resources.

Hydraulic fracturing (fracking) is used to extract oil and natural gas trapped in shale deposits that are otherwise difficult to exploit. 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.

On December 16, Parliament voted by 298 to 261 to allow fracking under all England's 10 national parks, five areas of Outstanding National Beauty, the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads and World Heritage Sites.

In January 2015, Members of Parliament (MPs) rejected a bid to suspend fracking in a House of Commons vote following a debate in which ministers promised an "outright ban" on fracking in national parks. The promise has been overturned with virtually no further debate.

The decision puts the UK's most beautiful countryside and wildlife under threat of poisoned water supplies and heavy vehicles with their associated noise and pollution. It sends a signal that the government is determined to push through fracking regardless of any environmental or safety issues and will ride roughshod over public opposition to it.

Since the vote, supportive MPs have reached new levels of Orwellian double-speak by claiming that the "whole point" of the new rules was to protect national parks—in the words of Conservative Nick Herbert, Arundel and South Downs MP.

No fracking is currently taking place in the UK, but

the government has made public its determination to establish a shale gas industry using arguments about the positive effect on the balance of payments along with claims that it will boost employment.

The government's drive to establish a fracking industry was stepped up the day after the vote when it handed out new licences for onshore gas and oil exploration in 159 blocks of 100 square kilometres each. This allows exploration for oil and gas across about 5,000 square miles of England, in addition to 1,000 square miles in licenses awarded in the summer. The blocks are incorporated into 93 onshore licences. Around 75 percent of the blocks are expected to be explored for unconventional shale oil or gas, which would be extracted using fracking.

The selloff included blocks in Scotland, England and Wales. A large proportion of the UK land mass (almost 7 percent) has been opened up to fracking in a single stroke, vast areas of Yorkshire and North West England, as well as some areas in the south of England.

Fracking will be allowed as long as the drilling work takes place from outside the restricted area and the fracking takes place 1.2 kilometres below ground level.

Not one of the 159 licences applied for was refused on grounds of environmental concerns, or on grounds of concerns with the company making the bid. All the areas where fracking may be possible have now been parcelled up and sold off.

The biggest winner in the selloff of exploration rights was Ineos, founded by billionaire Jim Ratcliffe. The company jumped ahead of Cuadrilla and IGas to become the UK's largest shale gas company by the number of licences (21). Ineos has gained fracking rights for more than a million acres of land. It is committed to drilling 20 wells and to frack 13 of them. The firm will potentially drill a further five wells. One

of Ineos' potential wells is in an area entirely within the North York Moors National Park.

Ken Cronin, chief executive of the lobby group representing onshore oil companies, told the *Financial Times*, "This is a big moment for us. It is the largest shale gas licensing we have ever had."

In contrast to the United States and Canada, due to the UK's high population density, all the areas affected by fracking are close to inhabited areas. Just in Greater Manchester, a densely populated county of 2.5 million people, sizable parts of Trafford, Rochdale, Salford, south Manchester, Bury, Bolton, and Wigan have been made available for fracking exploration. In the county of Yorkshire with a population of more than 5 million, land around Sheffield, Chesterfield, Barnsley and York is to be explored. Both areas are considered prime drilling targets because of the presence of a geological formation known as the Bowland Shale, thought likely to contain large amounts of trapped gas.

Using now-familiar language to justify the government's decision on the day of the selloff, Energy Minister Andrea Leadsom said in a statement, "Last month we set out the vital role gas will play in the UK's transition to a low-carbon future. The licenses offered today move us a step closer—driving forwards this industry which will provide secure, home grown energy to hardworking families and businesses for decades to come."

Little used powers to decide planning appeals on matters of "national importance" are to be invoked on behalf of the fracking companies. If local councils take longer than 16 weeks to decide on fracking applications—as has happened recently in Lancashire—the law will take the decision out of their hands and give it to Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Greg Clark, who is certain to rule on behalf of the companies.

The government has also changed the rules on property rights. Fracking companies no longer need permission from landowners to drill horizontally deep underground, even though this is likely to affect property values. In the US, this has proven to cause side effects including pollution and earthquakes.

Underlining the danger of earthquakes caused by fracking, Canadian authorities recently confirmed the largest earthquake—magnitude 4.6 on the Richter scale—caused by fracking in British Columbia, Canada

during August 2014.

Little if any debate preceded the vote. None was permitted over the licenses. The licenses to frackers were publicised in a statement released on December 17, the final day of Parliament's autumn session before the holiday and when the media were mainly following Prime Minister David Cameron's European Union renegotiation.

On the same day, with media attention focused elsewhere, in an attempt to bury numerous "bad news" announcements the government released 36 written statements, including on fracking.

As it announced massive support for the fracking firms, another statement announced that government subsidies for rooftop solar panels are to be slashed. The support for household solar panels and small wind turbines is to be reduced by 65 percent. Government funding support for large-scale solar projects is to be ended. An estimated 9,700 to 18,700 jobs could be lost in the solar power industry as a result.



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