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Anti-Fracking Ordinances and Public Trust in Unconventional Drilling

[Melinda Taylor](#) November 13, 2013 [1 Comment](#)

Last week, voters in three cities in Colorado and one in Ohio passed moratoriums on hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”), the controversial drilling practice that involves injecting a mixture of sand, water, and chemicals under high pressure into underground shale rock formations to release oil and natural gas trapped in the rock.

Boulder, Fort Collins, and Lafayette, Colorado and Oberlin, Ohio were the latest cities to be added to the growing [list](#) of municipalities in the United States that have approved moratoria and other [measures](#) to limit or ban fracking. The passage of the ballot measures was a victory for the anti-fracking [movement](#), and the latest indication that public concern about the practice is not diminishing. Indeed, opposition to fracking has increased markedly since last spring. A September [poll](#) conducted by the Pew Research Center shows a sharp increase in anti-fracking sentiment since March. Forty-nine percent of the American public is opposed to fracking now, up from 38% last March.

Widespread concern about the environmental risks of fracking began with the release of Josh Fox’s documentary “[Gasland](#)” in 2010. The film contained images of fish kills and water faucets on fire, as well as other environmental calamities allegedly caused by fracking. Though the natural gas industry strongly [criticized](#) the filmmaker for taking liberties with the facts, the negative images it contained captured the public’s imagination and ignited a grassroots opposition movement.

For the last three years, organizations like [Americans Against Fracking](#), [Food and Water Watch](#), 350.org, FrackFree America, Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and others have waged a guerrilla war against the oil and gas industry. They have focused on local and state-level initiatives for the most part, pushing for temporary and permanent moratoria on fracking. They have also lobbied state regulatory agencies, EPA, and the [Bureau of Land Management](#) for tighter requirements for well construction, water disposal, and air emissions controls. Last summer, they mobilized over 600,000 Americans to call for a complete ban on fracking on federal lands and are pushing for state-wide moratoria in Colorado, New York, and Ohio.

The anti-fracking movement has taken hold in other countries around the world, too. Earlier this fall, [protests](#) by First Nations groups in Canada were staged to object to shale gas exploration in New Brunswick. Last month, 2000 [demonstrators](#) showed up in Romania to protest Chevron’s plans to develop shale gas there. France and Bulgaria have passed national fracking moratoriums and Australia and the United Kingdom have enacted stringent environmental measures to regulate the practice.

The anti-fracking groups have largely controlled the public narrative about the risks of fracking, despite the fact that the scientific [studies](#) produced to date reveal a mixed picture with respect to environmental impacts. Researchers acknowledge the potential risk of groundwater contamination from well leaks and surface water pollution from spills. Fugitive emissions of methane and emissions from drilling equipment and flares are sources of air pollution that should be controlled. The ramp-up in drilling activity made possible by fracking has led to decreased visibility in Teddy Roosevelt National Park, according to a recent [study](#), and impacted the views in other [national parks](#).

But there are significant potential environmental and social benefits associated with the fracking boom, too. Natural gas is a much cleaner burning fuel than coal, producing about 30% less greenhouse gas emissions. Many scientists and policy makers consider natural gas to be the “bridge fuel” to a carbonless economy in the future. A [study](#) written by then-Professor Ernest Moniz when he was director of the MIT Energy Initiative, before he was named Secretary of Energy, emphasized the carbon savings achieved by burning natural gas rather than coal.

The fracking boom in the United States has put the country on a path toward energy independence, a welcome development for national security and economic growth. The U.S. no longer imports natural gas at all and is poised to surpass Saudi Arabia and become the world’s largest producer of oil by 2017, according to [report](#) by the International Energy Agency. Industry analysts [predict](#) that the United States will become a net exporter of oil and gas by 2025; in 2012, the nation became a net [exporter](#) of petroleum products for the first time since the 1940s.

The oil and gas industry has not done a good job of highlighting the environmental and social benefits that are associated with fracking and the once again thriving domestic energy business. The industry [resisted](#) calls for greater disclosure of the chemical composition of fracking fluids and opposed federal regulations of drilling on federal lands. The result is a public that remains skeptical of the industry and deeply concerned about its drilling practices.

Jonathan Wood, a senior global issues analyst with the consulting firm [Control Risks](#), has called for a four-part strategy to improve the industry’s image and neutralize opposition to fracking. Wood says the industry should (1) acknowledge local concerns about the impacts of drilling; (2) communicate with communities about their concerns and measures being taken to prevent harm; (3) take all necessary steps to reduce environmental damage from fracking and drilling; and (4) share the economic benefits of fracking with the communities where the activity is taking place. Wood’s prescription is a good start, but winning the public’s trust will take time, effort, and real world demonstrations that fracking can be done safely.

[fracking](#) [Texas](#)

One comment



Jennifer Larivey
January 22, 2014 2:20 pm

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