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# Fears of Water Contamination from Fracking Subside

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Ever since hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, burst onto the national scene a few years ago, people worried it would lead to significant water contamination. That worry appears to be ebbing.

The new [University of Texas at Austin Energy Poll](#) shows a big drop in concern about water contamination. Only 31% of respondents said that was their “greatest concern” – the lowest level measured in the past 3½ years of polling. Just six months ago, the poll found that 43% of people were worried that fracking would cause water contamination.

It’s worth noting there is a partisan divide at work here. In the latest poll, Democrats are almost twice as likely to be concerned about contamination as Republicans (38% to 20%.)

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What happened? Why does the public concern about fracking leading to water contamination appear to be receding?

I suspect there are many factors at play. Back in 2010, fracking was new to most people; it was a poorly understood and a scary industrial activity coming to a neighborhood near you. The movie *Gasland* didn't help when it famously presented water from faucets being set on fire.

Today, people are more familiar and comfortable with fracking. The new Energy Poll bears that out. Forty seven percent of people said they were "familiar" with fracking, up from 32% in 2012 when the poll started asking this question.

What's more, there have been thousands and thousands of wells drilled and fracked. Yet evidence of water contamination is scattered and isolated, not widespread.

There has also been a lot of work by scientists and journalists examining the issue of water contamination. By and large, people who have studied the issue have found that fracking does present a risk to drinking-water aquifers, but the risk is limited. That was the finding of the Environmental Protection Agency, which concluded last June: ["We did not find evidence that these mechanisms have led to widespread, systemic impacts on drinking water resources in the United States."](#) This week, a scientific advisory board concluded that these findings were ["appropriate and comprehensive"](#) although it recommends adding more clarity to the final draft of the study.

Others have made this point. The EPA didn't give a completely clean bill of health to fracking. Scott Anderson, a senior policy director at the Environmental Defense Fund, made this point on Wednesday at a presentation. "The EPA, in its 1,000-page study did observe they found no evidence of widespread" water contamination problems, "but they also said they found lots of individual instances." The impact is localized, not widespread.

As fracking has been demystified by articles and peer-reviewed studies, the amorphous fear of fracking has subsided. Instead, people have focused on concrete risks involved with fracking operations, such as stopping surface spills and making sure wells

oil and gas (19)

drought (17)

greenhouse gas emissions (14)

epa (13)

endangered species (12)

coal (12)

Clean Air Act (10)

groundwater (9)

methane (9)

are adequately cemented. That's a positive development.

A couple years ago, then MIT professor and current Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz said the risks of fracking were ["manageable"](#) although he warned that we shouldn't assume that meant it was being managed. The same is true today. Vigilance is still required.

The public's original fears that fracking would contaminate water supplies are subsiding. That's good. Nebulous fears don't help regulators or industry improve their track record.

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