

Fracking Finally Gets The Attention It Deserves

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Just one week before the 2020 Presidential election, two topics are dominating the conversation - the coronavirus and hydraulic fracturing, commonly known as fracking. The reason for the coronavirus is obvious, but many are surprised that fracking issues are so important.

Over the weekend, Democratic candidate Joe Biden was grilled during stops in Pennsylvania about his positions on fracking and on the oil and gas industry in general. The Biden/Harris campaign appears to have been caught off guard by the backlash against its energy positions, surprised by how the issue is playing out in the general election. Faced with numerous prior statements about ending fracking and fossil fuel development, Mr. Biden has backtracked, saying directly that he will not end fracking.

All of the polls show that Mr. Biden holds a lead in Pennsylvania, the largest northern battleground state, but nobody is conceding the state to Biden. Fracking is a big reason why. For the first time since the fracking revolution began in Pennsylvania in 2007, it is fracking opponents who have been put on the defensive.

Frankly, its about time. Main stream press reporting on this issue frequently has been one-sided, with the benefits (and problems) of fracking far more nuanced and deserving of closer scrutiny than generally reported. This fact that the benefits of fracking and true tradeoffs regarding the process so rarely get discussed highlights a danger for American society at large. Unless the facts are presented fairly, honestly, fully, and above all else objectively, we risk making poor policy choices simply because we are not being properly informed. If this 2020 election cycle does nothing else, showing that there is more than one side to the fracking debate can be hugely important moving forward.

Some specific examples are instructive. In 2018, researchers from three major American universities, Yale, Penn State, and the University of Cincinnati, performed independent studies on water pollution and fracking:

All of the studies reached the same overall conclusion - that there is little to no evidence the fracking process contributes to contamination of local groundwater. This conclusion however contradicts one of the most commonly held claims about fracking among its critics, and has been repeatedly stated in the press.

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Perhaps not surprisingly, given how entrenched the belief that fracking is a major source of groundwater pollution has become, the studies received little to no press attention. Even two of the universities themselves seemed reluctant to present their conclusions. Still, the studies confirmed the basic conclusion about fracking reached by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, which had been issued during the Obama Administration back in 2016. With some caveats, the EPA determined that little evidence exists connecting fracking to groundwater pollution at all.

Despite this, the vast majority of press reports on fracking have been negative, and continue to be so. Fracking has been linked to all sorts of maladies and environmental concerns. Not coincidentally, both fracking, and the pipelines used to transport the gas and oil produced by fracking, are being subjected to increasing state pressure and even outright bans.