
A drilling dilemma on fracking

Saturday, January 5, 2013

By federal estimate, California may be sitting atop one of the nation's largest oil deposits, buried in rock formations beneath the Central Valley and elsewhere. But tapping this pool will take a largely unregulated and potentially dangerous technique known as fracking that injects chemicals, water and sand to release the oil.

The known risks of fracking have churned up a cross-country debate that has arrived in full force here. California may have ambitious clean-energy goals, but it will still need oil and gas for many years, making fracking attractive. Formally known as hydraulic fracturing, it's credited with creating jobs, low natural gas prices and even future energy independence.

An official policy is overdue, and California should be in no mood to unleash fracking without a public examination of the risks and role of public oversight. Several bills to restrict the method died in the Legislature last year when oil firms objected, but the topic won't go away. It's even seeped into popular culture via a Hollywood movie, "Promised Land." Feeling the heat, Gov. Jerry Brown, through a state agency, has outlined changes. While only a draft at this point, the suggestions aren't much, barely a

start on a serious issue. Born of hearings and preliminary thinking, the package falls far short of comprehensive rule-making.

The draft requires drilling firms to tell the state where fracking will be used. But the draft doesn't suggest requiring a fracking permit, and drillers could go to work 10 days after filing plans. Neighbors such as farmers, ranchers or residents would get minimal advance notice and are not given an appeals process.

On another important topic, the plan borrows weak rules from other states that allow drilling firms to conceal the chemicals used in fracking - some of them known to be harmful - if the injectable brew is considered to be a trade secret.

These chemicals, pumped underground under pressure, are the key to unlocking the oil supplies from the once-untappable shale rock. But the soupy mix has the potential to leak and taint drinking-water supplies.

The plan's authors with the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources note that fracking has been used for years in this state with no major problems. Further, the plan carries specifics on well designs and maintenance with

directives on containing the brew of chemicals, water and sand.

Still, these rules aren't much assurance if the technique goes wide-screen and is deployed near inhabited areas. The pressure for drilling is formidable: some 18,000 acres were snapped up for oil leases at a federal auction last month. Past experience may not cover the future challenges.

The draft's reception is telling. Oil firms praised the plan, saying it gives the state a chance to explore with the latest technology. But environmental groups complained about the lack of full disclosure and public notice.

Brown's team has a long way to go to bridge this gap. A policy this accepting of the oil industry's outlook can't be the final word, and probably won't be. The schedule calls for a year to revise the first-step draft.

California should consider every angle in weighing the risks and rewards of fracking. It would be foolish to ignore a promising technology that can access oil reserves once considered unreachable. Natural gas prices - a key factor in nearly every California utility bill - are dropping, thanks to wider drilling that uses fracking. But there must be a fair process that recognizes the public's reasonable doubts and the oil industry's responsibilities. So far, this balance is missing.