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The push to squeeze every last drop of fossil fuels from the planet is no longer a wise policy choice. It is time to put even more focus on developing alternative forms of energy that will power our economy — and the world's — into the future. That's where the new jobs and new industries will be created. Houston's enormous concentration of energy research and experience should make it ground zero for innovation that will continue the region's transformation from the world's oil and gas capital to its energy capital.

Re-opening our forests and grasslands to drilling is a step in the wrong direction. The risks to our air, water, wildlife and other natural resources are too great and the benefits are too tenuous and fleeting.

The moratorium on new leases for the areas in and around the National Forests and Grasslands of Texas should remain in place.

Don't allow drilling in Texas' national forests, grasslands

Long-term risks to drinking water, environment outweigh short-term gains

A Trump administration proposal to open more than 1.9 million acres of Texas national forests and grasslands to renewed oil and natural gas drilling is a no-brainer for supporters of the shale revolution.

The change would allow oil and natural gas companies to drill more than 1,000 horizontal wells and 500 vertical wells in parts of Sam Houston National Forest, Davy Crockett National Forest, Angelina National Forest, Sabine National Forest, Caddo National Grasslands and LBJ National Grasslands over the next 20 years. The U.S. Forest Service predicts that those 1,500 wells would produce more than 68 million barrels of oil and more than 4.2 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

The jobs, royalties, energy independence and boost to the state's economy are all compelling arguments for lifting the Obama-era moratorium on exploration in the areas.

But those rewards come with substantial risks for what is, in the end, a short-term gain.

The forests are part of the Haynesville shale of East Texas and Louisiana. The grasslands are part of the Barnett shale of North Texas. Energy companies had drilled in both areas for years before the Obama administration halted new leases in 2016 in response to pressure from environmentalists and others concerned about the effects of hydraulic fracturing, better known as fracking.

The process involves pumping large amounts of water, sand and chemicals down a well at high pressure to fracture the rock and release the gas or oil trapped in the formations.

Fracking has been a significant boost to the U.S. oil and gas industry, making the country a net exporter of oil for the first time in decades. But it also has raised serious concerns about geological and environmental damage.

The Forest Service estimates that the new wells in the Texas forests and grasslands will produce more than 32 billion gallons of wastewater that would have to be recycled or injected underground. That process can increase the risk of earthquakes and contamination — above and below ground.

The Arizona-based environmental group Center for Biological Diversity says the wells would be a threat to wildlife, water quality and air quality in both Houston and Dallas.

The proposal would allow companies to drill thousands of feet under Lake Conroe, the main source of drinking water for thousands of people in suburban Montgomery County.

Industry officials say that Texas oil and natural gas operators "comply with all state and federal regulatory requirements and adhere to the highest levels of safety and environmental standards" and that the various forms of extraction, including fracking, can be done safely.

In its report on the proposed changes, the U.S. Forest Service acknowledges that the explosive growth in fracking has triggered a rise in the number of earthquakes — a trend seen in North Texas and, to a much greater degree, in Oklahoma. The report notes, as many academic studies have confirmed, the increase in quakes is

tied not to fracking itself, but to disposal of dirty water that is a byproduct of the fracking process. But for someone dealing with the consequences of earthquakes, whether they were caused by the drilling or by the disposal of wastewater by shooting deep into the ground can seem entirely academic.

Oil and gas companies have made strides in improving the safety and efficiency in their drilling operations, but the risk calculation has grown as we learn more about the long term, and possibly irreversible, damage we are doing to our environment and to our climate.

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