

FRACKING MOVING ON

**Love Leitrim**

It's difficult to believe that a year has gone by and that it is time for another Leitrim Guardian, it's been a busy year in the campaign against fracking in Ireland. For those who missed last years Guardian there have been options licenses issued to two companies to explore the possibility of shale gas extraction in the North West, licenses have also been issued for the Clare basin and in Northern Ireland. Fracking or more correctly hydraulic fracturing is a technique used by the gas companies to fracture the shale rock to release the gas trapped within, this technique is causing growing concerns worldwide due to it's effects on the environment and human health. The purpose of this article is to give an update on what has happened in the last year and to look forward to what we expect to happen in 2013.

A quick overview of some of the main activities during the last year. This has been a real community based grass-roots opposition movement, numerous local groups have been formed and there has been a lot of activity, and many public meetings have been held. While a lot of energy has been focused on awareness raising and education other activities have also occurred. Strenuous political lobbying has taken place at local, national and European level. All politicians in the North West are now keenly aware of local concerns and are very supportive of the campaign with the result that several local councils have voted for either bans or moratoria on fracking. There has been a tremendous energy attached to these locally based community organisations.



A rough composite of what Fermanagh might look like, part of a postcard campaign

There is also an international dimension to the campaign with links formed with groups opposing fracking all over the world. We have had speakers come to the North West from Germany, America, Canada, Nigeria and India. Some speakers have informed us of how the campaigns are progressing in their own countries, while speakers from countries where fracking is taking place have spoken of the effects this process has had on their health, their environment and on their communities.

From the government side we have several reports published, the most important report in Ireland was the 'Aberdeen Report', commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency. The use of Aberdeen University, with its close links to the oil and gas industry, was of major concern to campaigners, and it was no surprise

when the reports conclusion was that fracking could be carried out safely provided that it was correctly regulated. This report focused mainly on the hydraulic fracturing process and did not explore the wider issues related to unconventional gas extraction. One of the peer reviewed studies that the report based its conclusions on has now been discredited as the main author had links with the fracking industry that were not disclosed at the time of producing the report. There have been several detailed reports from the EU, looking at regulatory gaps and issues around unconventional gas extraction. Globally the campaign has had some successes with fracking banned or suspended in several countries, most recently with the moratorium extended for another five years in France.



Fracking drilling rig accident at Forth Worth Texas, They say accidents never happen

The story from around the world has been depressingly familiar, the power of oil and gas companies with practically unlimited pockets versus poorly funded local activists. The influence that corporations have over politicians and how the powers of the state have been used to further the case of Trans-global corporations' is disturbing. Around the world you will hear the governments and media describe groups campaigning to protect their local environment as being 'shrill' and 'being opposed to development'. We all need to understand that 'the environment' is not something external to us, to be admired from afar or somewhere you go for a walk in at the weekend. This is our habitat and everybody's health and well-being is dependent on having access to clean air and water and being protected from toxic waste.

There are numerous local groups. These groups obviously have the same goal but different local groups

approach the problem in their own fashion, some groups focus on raising awareness, some on political lobbying, others examine legal methods of ensuring that the government respect our right to a safe environment.

In 2012 we had a lot of meetings some given by the gas company and others by the anti-fracking campaign. We learned that the gas company spoke out of both sides of its mouth, the picture changed at each location they gave presentations at: the estimates of available gas in the ground ballooned; the number of jobs that were going to be provided increased; the amount of money that was going to line the coffers of the state was mind boggling. We also learned that we needed to talk about shale gas extraction rather than just fracking. It is the whole project and the scale of it that is of major concern (more on this later), where as the gas companies and government focused only on the hydraulic fracturing process itself.

We have been dismayed to learn the proposed scale of the project, one gas company has informed us that the project could extend to 9000 wells on 280,000 acres. This translates to one 24 well drilling pad every square mile. The possible impact of this development on a scenic rural area is difficult to comprehend. The same company suggests that they will use 4,000,000 litres of clean water and 500 tonnes of sand for each well. This means that each drilling pad will require at least 100 million litres or

40 Olympic sized swimming pools and 600 truck loads of sand.

So where to from here? The next few months will be busy, the companies with options licenses must present their work program to the Department of Communications Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR). Following assessment DCENR can then grant the companies an exploration license which is the second stage of the licensing process. An exploration license allows the companies to conduct test drilling with hydraulic fracturing, basically a small number of full blown wells. We believe that it is vital to prevent this exploration license being granted as it will open the doors to full stage production.

Laura Burke, the director of the EPA stated at a recent Dáil committee hearing, that the EPA would have no role in monitoring this exploration stage of the shale gas licenses The obvious question then must be, 'Who will protect the environment at this stage of the process?'. Laura Burke was quoted in the Irish Times on April 17 2012 saying 'The EPA should not be rushing to prosecute business for not complying with environmental licenses and regulations'. This, from the agency that we are supposed to rely on to enforce environmental legislation and protect our environment, is profoundly disappointing. We need to realise that we cannot rely on outside agencies to look out for us. Leitrim, and the surrounding areas, will have to look after themselves.

Even as I write new peer reviewed articles are published every week. The latest research by Professor Anthony Ingraffia from Cornell University, looking at wells drilled in the Marcellus Shale over the last three years, has shown a well casings failure rate of greater than 6%. The well casing is the steel and cement lining that is supposed to protect the ground water from pollution, it is highly likely that we will experience the same failure rate in Ireland; a 6% failure rate over 9000 wells would mean potentially 720 leaking wells in this area. Another report by Dr Eilish Cleary, an Irish doctor who is the Chief Medical Officer in New Brunswick in Canada, looking at the potential impacts of Shale gas extraction in that province, clearly outlines some of the possible health and social impacts of this industry.

So what can be done? Firstly, whether

people are for or against shale gas extraction, it is vitally important that everybody inform themselves. If shale gas extraction takes place anywhere on the island of Ireland then it has to potential to affect the whole island. Ireland's reputation as a clean green place to visit and as a producer of premium clean food is potentially at risk. Tourism and agriculture are the mainstay of employment in rural Ireland and any potential economic gain from shale gas extraction is dwarfed by the potential for economic loss. So before anyone makes up their mind in relation to shale gas extraction they should have a clear understanding of the process that they are for or against. Secondly get involved, if you feel that shale gas extraction should not go ahead join one of the local groups, lobby your politicians, local, national and European. Raise awareness, start the debate with your neighbours and in your local communities..

Acting together we can prevent this process going ahead. Visit the following websites to get more information on Shale gas extraction:

<http://Frackingfreeireland.org/>

<http://sites.google.com/site/frackingireland/>

<http://sites.google.com/site/frackingireland/>

<http://shalegasresearchireland.wordpress.com/about-2/>

<http://frackingfreeclare.org/>

<http://nofrackingireland.wordpress/>

<http://what-the-frack.org/>

<http://frackaware.com/wordpress/>

<http://notofracking.com/>

are N. Ireland websites