Don’t shut down fracking — regulate it instead

By Editorial Board
December 16, 2016

HYDRAULIC FRACTURING — also known as fracking — has been a roiling issue over the past several years. For much of that time, Environmental Protection Agency experts have been studying the practice, used to extract oil and natural gas from underground rock formations, at Congress’s behest. The agency released its final report Tuesday, and the conclusion the findings support is inescapable: Fracking should not be shut down — it should be well-regulated.

Various players in the fracking debate reacted to the EPA’s work, which focused on fracking’s possible effects on drinking water, by claiming some degree of vindication. The report backed off controversial language included in a draft that suggested no “widespread, systemic impacts,” and underscored that there is still some uncertainty about fracking’s impact. Environmental activists played up the report’s finding that it is possible for fracking operations to harm drinking water in certain circumstances. Industry boosters noted that, despite the shift in wording, the EPA found only scattered and anecdotal records of any kind of harm.

In fact, the report’s findings help neither the activists who want to end fracking nor the industry that wants unfettered drilling. This should be unsurprising to reasonable observers following the issue for the past several years; the facts have never supported either side’s radical position.
Of course there is potential for fracking to affect drinking water. This can occur because of poor drilling jobs, drilling too close to old wells, injecting fracking fluid at the same depth as water resources, mishandling fracking chemicals, improperly collecting flowback water, carelessly disposing of wastewater, failing to seal spent wells properly and using up scarce water resources in drought zones. The EPA found real-world instances of harm, including a 30-foot geyser of brine and gas that shot out of an old well in Pennsylvania after a nearby frack job forced drilling fluid into the ground at high pressure.

But, the agency also noted, the number of fracked wells in the country has been astonishingly high in recent years, and there is only sparse and isolated evidence of real harm. Meanwhile, drilling for gas has provided jobs and helped displace dirty coal as an energy source.

This is not to say the EPA documented every instance of harm — it did not. The agency stressed that there is still uncertainty about how often fracking affects nearby water. But in documenting the ways in which fracking might contaminate water, the EPA provided a road map for minimizing the potential for harm. Regulations should do things such as require solid well casings, prohibit injecting water too close to the water table, demand that drillers account for nearby wells and force operators to take care in handling chemicals and wastewater. Even as fracking continues, regulators should ensure consistent and careful monitoring of nearby water resources.

With the Trump administration poised to ramp up drilling across the country, officials should keep the EPA’s balanced report in mind. A host of fracking regulations are justified — not in the interest of punishing industry or asserting federal control, but of public health and environmental responsibility. With smart state and federal rules, the country can reap big economic and environmental benefits with far lower risks, more local acceptance and a cleaner conscience.

Read more on this topic:

Mary Lehman and George Leventhal: Ban fracking for good in Maryland

The Post’s View: Mr. Sanders’s fractured reasoning on fracking

Michael R. Bloomberg and George P. Mitchell: Fracking is too important to foul up

The Post’s View: There’s no need to panic over fracking-related quakes

The Post’s View: Is our drinking water safe from fracking?