Climate Scientists Ignore California’s Energy Realities

This September, California adopted the nation’s strictest regulations for the oil extraction process known as hydraulic fracturing. The landmark bill, SB 4, was authored by one of our state’s preeminent environmental leaders, Senator Fran Pavley, and signed by Jerry Brown, one of the nation’s greenest governors.

In addition to imposing stringent notification, disclosure and operational requirements, the legislation calls for the most far-reaching study of hydraulic fracturing ever conducted. During the research period, safe, responsible fracturing will be permitted, with SB 4’s provisions safeguarding our water, environment and public health.

So why did a group of climate scientists recently write to Governor Brown urging an immediate moratorium on hydraulic fracturing? Their lengthy letter, which conspicuously ignored the fact that fracturing has been going on in California for the past 60 years virtually without incident, is a telling example of the underlying issues we are facing in California and elsewhere.

The group raised concerns about water quality, greenhouse gas emissions and seismic impacts. But their most urgent fear is that hydraulic fracturing could increase the supply of fossil fuels and contribute to increased global warming. This view ignores the reality that our economy, our comforts and conveniences, our security, indeed our very lifestyles depend on an abundant and reliable supply of petroleum energy. And that energy is either going to be produced here at home – by California workers under the most stringent environmental regulations – or produced somewhere else and brought to us in ships.

Consider also that the California Energy Commission, US Energy Information Administration and International Energy Agency have all predicted a growing global demand for gasoline and diesel fuel as
emerging economies in Asia and elsewhere lift millions of people out of poverty. Despite rapid and promising growth in alternative energy sources, fossil fuels will be the primary source of energy for those economies and ours for decades to come. Thus, the ability to produce that energy domestically is welcome news.

A few other facts not included in the climate scientists’ letter:

- California’s landmark climate change law, AB 32, covers all oil and gas operations, thus requiring reductions in greenhouse gas emissions;
- 96 percent of the transportation in California is fueled by petroleum products;
- We currently produce just 38 percent of the petroleum energy we use each day; no pipelines connect California to other oil producing regions so the rest comes here in tankers;

The climate scientists also failed to mention that hydraulic fracturing and the natural gas it has unlocked have been a major contributor to reduced greenhouse gas emissions in the United States. The conversion of coal-fired electricity generation plants to cleaner burning, lower carbon natural gas is one of the main reasons GHG emissions in the United States have fallen to levels not seen since 1994.

Moreover, if California continues to increase its oil imports rather than develop the resources in our own backyard the ships, trucks and tanker trains that transport that oil here from across the world will greatly increase our carbon footprint.

In addition to avoiding importing GHGs along with oil, responsible in-state production will open the door to the potential for unprecedented job creation (estimated at roughly 200,000 new jobs in the Central Valley alone), billions of dollars in state and local tax revenues to fund schools, public safety, libraries, infrastructure improvements and other essential public services that have suffered for years during our prolonged recession.

No one is suggesting these gifts must come at the expense of safety or the environment. Many well-respected experts have evaluated the risks and drawn comforting conclusions. For example:

“Fracking has been around for decades, and there’s a tremendous amount of misinformation out there about it, a lot of fear that I think is unfounded.”
- US Interior Secretary Sally Jewell

“My point of view, based on my own study of hydraulic fracturing, is that it can be done safely and has been done safely hundreds of thousands of times.”
- Former Obama Administration US Interior Secretary Ken Salazar
before the US Congress

"In no case have we made a definitive determination that the fracking process has caused chemicals to enter groundwater.
- Former Obama Administration US Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson

A final word: the scientists urging the Governor to ban hydraulic fracturing frame many of their arguments in terms of potential – not proven – threats. But the state is already embarking on an exhaustive study of those concerns.

Here’s what we do know: Hydraulic fracturing has been safely conducted in California for decades. Use of this technology to responsibly access the vast reserves of the Monterey Shale formation has the potential to create hundreds of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in revenues, with the added bonus of energy security. States that have welcomed shale energy development are experiencing budget surpluses and low unemployment.

With SB 4 in place, we now have a balanced approach to energy production with the safeguards the Legislature and California citizens desired. And we have some of the world’s most aggressive climate change policies. There’s no reason ideologically driven and unfounded speculation should deprive Californians of the benefits our resources can provide us.

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