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As Dems Debate Fossil Fuels, New Report Shows Fracking Worse Than Thought

New data shows fracking's effects on public health, wildlife, economies, and communities, adding context as Dems debate fracking on national stage

by Nika Knight, staff writer



A 2009 aerial photo shows fracking's extensive disturbance of the landscape in Wyoming. (Photo: [EcoFlight/cc](#))

On the same day that the Democratic presidential contenders [debated](#) fracking on the national stage, a new, exhaustive, and damning report on the subject was published by Environment America.



Fracking fluids spill into a creek in W. Va. in 2009. Photo: Ed Wade Jr. and Wetzel County Action Group, via Environment America Research & Policy Center.

The researchers' analysis of new data found that the unconventional mining process poses "grave" and "severe" threats to public health, wildlife habitat, national parks, air quality, and the economic well-being of communities. "For the past decade, fracking has been a nightmare for our drinking water, our open spaces, and our climate," Rachel Richardson, a co-author of the report, [told ThinkProgress](#).

The [report](#) (pdf), *Fracking by the Numbers: the Damage to Our Water, Land and Climate from a Decade of Dirty Drilling*, was published Thursday and analyzes data released by government and industry sources over the past ten years.

"Whether you are already on the front lines of fracking or are simply worried about your children having a safe future," said Richardson, "the numbers don't lie."

ThinkProgress described a few issues highlighted in the report's extensive survey of fracking's deleterious effects:

At this point, more than a thousand square miles of the country have been disturbed by fracking activity, the report says, with 137,000 fracking wells drilled or permitted across more than 20 states.

"I think the report paints a frightening picture of fracking's harms," Richardson said. "A lot of these harms are things that people living on fracking's front lines are experiencing first hand."

It's not just humans who are being impacted. In one area of Wyoming, the mule deer population has fallen by 40 percent in the past 15 years—coinciding, the report says, with a fracking boom in the Pinedale Mesa region.

The report also focused on fracking's depletion of local water sources. The process of injecting water into the ground at high enough pressures to crack shale demands a tremendous amount of water and—especially in drought-prone regions—that has harmed farmers and community members who have seen their water supply dwindle as a result of the industry's thirst.

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"Each well that is fracked requires hundreds of thousands or millions of gallons of water, depending on the formation and the depth and length of any horizontal portion of the well," notes the report:

Unlike most industrial uses of water, in which water returns to the water cycle for further use, water used in fracking typically cannot be cleaned up

for a broad range of other uses. Water used in fracking either remains in the well, is “recycled” (used in the fracking of new wells), or is disposed of in deep injection wells, where it is unavailable to recharge aquifers. Thus, fracking takes billions of gallons out of the water supply annually.

In some areas, fracking makes up a significant share of overall water demand. Texas’ Eagle Ford Shale oil play used nearly 18 billion gallons of water in 2013, roughly 16 percent of the area’s total water consumption.

Demand for water by oil and gas companies has harmed farmers and local communities. For example, the municipal water supply went dry in Barnhart, Texas, in 2013, after excessive water withdrawals for fracking compounded the effects of a years-long drought.

Table ES-2. Estimated Impacts of Fracking, Selected States. Data are cumulative impacts since 2005, except where noted.

State	Wells Fracked	Hydrochloric Acid Used (thousand pounds)	Methanol Used (thousand pounds)	Wastewater Produced in 2014 (million gallons)	Water Consumed (million gallons)	Methane Released from Well Completion in 2014 (million pounds)	Land Disturbed (acres)
Arkansas	6,496	142,406	2,025	unavailable	11,290	144	22,858
California	3,405	1,034	489	1,057	237	140	15,940
Colorado	22,615	68,663	10,042	3,139	19,142	395	105,866
Louisiana	2,883	15,136	2,045	unavailable	4,880	50	16,010
New Mexico	4,318	70,798	4,403	8,592	3,132	125	35,273
North Dakota	8,224	82,198	88,168	unavailable	14,891	517	33,718
Ohio	1,594	105,447	1,942	313	7,771	136	9,118
Oklahoma	7,421	455,225	17,147	unavailable	19,582	546	41,210
Pennsylvania	9,233	1,806,032	5,396	1,821	24,732	295	52,813
Texas	54,958	2,148,789	302,501	unavailable	120,215	2,521	257,272
Utah	4,949	35,926	1,414	unavailable	916	186	35,478
West Virginia	2,670	64,134	1,174	unavailable	7,651	88	15,272
Wyoming	7,277	18,074	5,870	70	2,528	116	29,836
TOTAL	137,743	5,038,953	444,786	14,993	239,166	5,340	679,148

Image: Environment America Research & Policy Center

The report analyzed data that ultimately showed the following fracking-related issues were cause for great concern:

- Contaminated drinking water
- Rapid consumption of already scarce water resources
- Endangering public health with air pollution via prevalent methane leaks
- Exacerbating global warming
- Damaging America's natural heritage with bids to drill in national parks
- Imposing costs on communities, while oil and gas companies skip the bill for cleaning up pollution

The report is a follow-up to a 2013 missive, and the researchers noted that "while this new report is a more comprehensive telling of fracking's consequences, gaps remain in our knowledge. Not all states require disclosure of which wells are fracked, or what chemicals have been used. Reported information is often incomplete or inaccurate, preventing analysis of a large subset of wells."

"This report synthesizes the best data currently available about fracking," wrote the report's authors. "We hope it inspires members of the public and policymakers to take decisive action to address the destruction caused by fracking."

The report comes in the midst of a contentious debate on fracking between the Democratic Party's presidential candidates, and as environmentalists [condemn](#) a popular argument that posits that natural gas can somehow ease a transition to renewable energy.

As Food & Water Watch's Wenonah Hauter [stated](#) on Friday, "Last night's Democratic debate, like the previous debate, is a testament to the growing political power of the movement to ban fracking, keep fossil fuels in the ground, and move swiftly to clean energy."

In this context, the report appears to lend weight to arguments in favor of a general ban on fracking. Indeed, one of the authors' conclusions in the report is to urge for a ban on fracking "wherever possible."

Bernie Sanders advocates for a fracking ban, while Hillary Clinton promoted fracking worldwide in her role as secretary of state.

"The best way to protect our health from fracking is to ban this practice and keep these dirty fuels in the ground," said Richardson to *ThinkProgress*.

"The science tells us that the climate is changing faster than ever predicted —there is no room for incrementalism here," said Yong Jung Cho, spokesperson for 350 Action, in a [statement](#). "Secretary Clinton has ramped up plans to tackle climate change, yet she's still referring to natural gas as a potential 'bridge fuel.' It's time that she recognize natural gas for what it is: a fossil fuel and a major contributor to climate change."

"The pressure on our officials to stand up with the science on climate change will only continue to ramp up," wrote Hauter. "A [recent poll](#) shows the majority of Americans are opposed to fracking."

"Referring to natural gas as a bridge fuel is no longer a defensible position, given the devastating effects of methane on our climate," Hauter continued.

"The [March for a Clean Energy Revolution](#) at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia in July will double down on the pressure our leaders are facing to take decisive action on climate change."

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