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Br. David Andrews: The morality of fracking

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Eco Catholic

Holy Cross Br. David Andrews is a senior representative at Food and Water Watch, a consumer group based in Washington. He is former director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

Human illness, environmental contamination, serious animal illnesses, a danger to our food system: these are some of the discovered effects of hydraulic fracking, a now growing method of releasing natural gas for energy production.

Fracking involves injecting millions of gallons of pressurized water, chemicals, and sand into the earth to loosen shale to release natural gas. Headaches, dizziness, endocrine disruption, cancer, memory loss, complaints about gastrointestinal problems have been among the illnesses resulting from contact with fracking's contaminated water. Evidence has mounted that earthquakes in Arkansas have resulted from using this method of gas recovery. Polluted water has harmed animals as well as humans. Some fracking has caused exploding wells.

The long term effects of fracking has yet to be discovered. It is a technique now being utilized in 34 states. In 2005 the EPA caved in to political pressure and got out of regulating fracking and did not require that the chemicals used be identified creating a loophole in the law promoted by Halliburton. Fracking was exempt from the Clean Water Act. It only takes low concentrations of benzene and diesel fuel, two compounds found in fracking studies, to lead to severe health and environmental consequences. Illnesses traced to fracking have been documented in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Colorado, Wyoming and Alabama. The water from fracking is a particular danger to rural communities in that it flows in waste treatment plants at a scale far beyond their capacity, thus leaving rural water resources vulnerable to contamination.

Most religious groups recognize moral principles such as the dignity of the human person, the care for

creation and an appreciation of the welfare of animals. On all these concerns, fracking comes up short. It harms communities and harms creation. We don't know what the long term effects will be, but we know enough to challenge that it benefits anyone except the corporations that make huge profits off of the energy production and does little for the health of people, animals and of nature.

So religious groups such as the Sisters of Saint Francis of Philadelphia have advocated against this process. In early April, 2011, America, the national magazine of the Jesuits editorialized about very critically about it, parish leaders have held community meetings in their churches warning about it.

Denominations have organized the faith community to write letters to congress arguing that creation and communities are being put at risk by this practice. In a letter of a year ago (May 24, 2010) the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The National Council of Churches, USA, the Union for Reform Judaism, the United Church of Christ, The United Methodist Church and others assert that the process poses a "threat to drinking water resource and is of concern to a growing number of communities."

One region where fracking is on the increase is the Marcellus Shale gas field which spreads through New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. These areas are among those areas now being recognized for their fertile and growing regional food systems. As the local food systems grow so too does the threat from fracking.

Farmers are reporting that their livelihoods and landscapes are being destroyed and are under serious threat. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture quarantined 28 cattle that had come into wastewater from a fracking well that showed concentrations of chlorine, barium, magnesium, potassium, and radioactive strontium. Homeowners near fracked well sites complain about a host of frightening consequences from poisoned wells to sickened pets to debilitating illnesses.

The director of the Food Animal Residue Avoidance Databank, a group of animal science professors that tracks incidents of chemical contamination in livestock has reported that there are many requests from veterinarians dealing with exposure to contaminants, including the byproducts of fracking.

At least 596 chemicals are used in fracking, but the companies are not required by law to divulge the ingredients which are considered trade secrets. In Louisiana, 16 cows that drank fluid from a fracked well began bellowing, foaming and bleeding at the mouth, then dropped dead. The dangers are real and very dangerous.

Fracking is a method of extracting gas which has incredible dangers for which the moral remedy is that it be banned in the name of human dignity, environmental protection, and animal welfare.

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