

## Is There Any Scientific Study - Not Sponsored by Industry - that Asserts Fracking is Safe?

By Steve Rushton

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A Talk Fracking event in London, which was the finale to a U.K.-wide tour, recently offered the opportunity to ask this burning question. With more than 250 in attendance, the motto of the day was: "Listen to the leading voices on both sides of the argument and have your say." Talk Fracking had invited experts, industry insiders, environmentalists, politicians and diplomats to debate in a panel discussion format.

But amazingly, no one from the industry – that is, no one backing the case to frack – showed up, leaving many questions unanswered.

### **Who Says Fracking is Safe, and Who is Paying Them?**

While fracking is still in its initial phases, the U.K.'s government and industry have made no secret of their plans to spread it across the country. The question remains: Has any objective scientist, not paid by the industry, actually confirmed that the drilling process is safe?

Last year's Shale Gas Environmental Summit in London evoked this question as well, as research into the supposedly independent experts making the case to frack Britain revealed those individuals were either in the pay of the fracking industry or linked to it in other direct ways.

For instance, the summit's chair, an academic named John Howe, presented research into the impacts of fracking that was paid for by fracking giant Cuadrilla, one of the main companies that aims to frack all over Britain.

Another example is the Royal Academy of Engineering, which takes direct funding from the natural gas industry. The Academy's former president, Lord Browne, is chairman of Cuadrilla. And its most recent president headed Anglo American, with fracking interests in South Africa.

In partnership with the Royal Society, the Academy co-wrote a report asserting that if an economic boom occurs in fracking, the industry will be able to effectively manage whatever environmental and health threats emerge, including toxic and radioactive contamination of the U.K.'s aquifers and ecosystems. Such documents have been pushed forward as seminal, informative works within the government as it seeks to legitimize the industry nationwide.

### **Show Us Non-Industry-Sponsored Research that Favors Fracking...Anywhere**

The government's Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) has touted fracking as a bridge to a low carbon future, commissioning a report by the British Geological Survey. And although the body may sound independent, it too is funded by fracking companies such as Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Exxon, BG Group and Schlumberger.

Even on the contentious issue of fracking causing earthquakes, it seems the industry is sponsoring British government "science." A Parliamentary report that downplays seismic risks states, "Cuadrilla funded a geo-mechanical study by the BGS [British Geological Survey] which was given to DECC to consider."

It continues to explain how the DECC arrived at its outcome using the oil industry-funded study. More recently, it has come to light that fracking magnate Lord Browne assists in the appointment of senior DECC staff. Also appearing this month, a report by the Geological Survey downplays the risks of fracking on water contamination, with the Natural Environment Research Council serving as authors.

The group's innovation board, which directs how its research can benefit business, includes Schlumberger's vice president of research, Dr. Simon Bittleston, and Shell Global Solutions's European research manager, Malcolm Salisbury. Schlumberger produces frack fluids and sponsors the British Geological Survey. Shell also funds the NERC.

### **More Questions at Talk Fracking**

In introducing the Talk Fracking event in London, designer Vivienne Westwood challenged the government's plans to frack across 60% of the country without first holding a broad debate. This was her motivation to fund the Talk Fracking series: as a way to encourage the conversation.

On the panel, John Ashton made the point that fracking conflicted with today's crucial global crisis: climate change. A former climate diplomat, Ashton was the Special Representative for Climate Change at the U.K. Foreign Office from 2006 to 2012.

"It is not really that complicated: You can be in favor of fracking for shale gas, or you can be in favor of fixing the climate," Ashton said. "Fracking is about creating short-term opportunities for those not in the communities where it will operate, whereas all the costs are given to locals. It's fraudulent."

Tina Rothery, from Residents Action on Fylde Fracking, discussed specifically the industry's relationship with local communities. She said that in 2011, when fracking initially started in the U.K., it took six weeks for Cuadrilla to admit its operations were the likely cause of new earthquakes in the country. The findings eventually led to a moratorium on fracking, which was later lifted following a survey by the [industry-sponsored British Geological Survey]<http://www.eap.bgs.ac.uk/index.html>).

Cuadrilla's failure to admit culpability for the earthquakes raises further issues around claims that the British industry operates with an excellent safety standard, without cover-ups of accidents or incidents. Those questions are further amplified by the leadership of Lord Browne – who earned the nickname Lord Oil Slick for his policy of cutting corners and lowering health and safety standards to boost profits during his decade-long tenure as the head of BP.

Those cost-cutting measures were greatly blamed for causing the world's largest ever oil spill when the BP Deepwater Horizon exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. A Forbes article from 2001 showed that Browne was integral in BP's shift to deepwater oil drilling, based on his promises of safe, cheap and abundant oil.

Now, as the head of Cuadrilla, he seems to be regurgitating those claims all over again with his promises about fracking producing energy at low prices and little cost to health and safety.

Also at the Talk Fracking event, Rothery told the audience about a 6,000 page document that was recently pushed through as part of the U.K. government's plans to speed up fracking applications in the northeast. In comparison, she said, other fracking operations across the country are only at their initial stages, with rigs and boreholes being drilled in preparation for latter full-scale operations. Near Blackpool, Rothery said, these plans will mean "genuine high volume fracking, with 24-hour illumination, 7 days a week."

She added that the anti-fracking movement has grown extensively across the country – and has learned from its U.S. counterparts. One of those allies, Liz Arnold, an anti-fracking campaigner from Pennsylvania, recounted to the audience how she had interrupted the final gubernatorial debate in Pennsylvania by calling on the candidates to speak about fracking and the thousands of lives it had ruined in the state.

More than 6,000 people have suffered losses, illness and death due to the drilling and contamination, she said. Arnold told the audience that industry data shows 5% of wells fail immediately, and half fail within 30 years. "These are superhighways open for toxic and radioactive contaminants to get into our water supply," she said.

### **Mainstream Media Independence?**

Another core question raised at the Talk Fracking event was the role of the media. Ashton said swathes of the British media should be held responsible for not instigating an extensive debate on fracking. "Across the mainstream media, there is no serious conversation about the kind of economy we want to build and [the] type of country we want to be," he said.

Rupert Murdoch's media empire is a key example. The Sun newspaper, a widely read tabloid, has been openly pushing the public to get behind fracking. This should come as no surprise, given that Murdoch, along with the former U.S. vice president, Dick Cheney, has fracking interests in Genie Energy and American Shale Oil Corp, a company under accusations of ignoring faulty wells.

Fox News, the Washington Post and the London Times have all come under criticism for pushing Murdoch's fracking agenda without disclosing his conflict of interest.

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