

South East Fracking Workshop

Environmental groups and others met for the South East Fracking Workshop at Lenham Community Centre in Kent on Saturday 26 January. CPRE Protect Kent led the workshop, also present were representatives from CPRE Sussex, Friends of the Earth, Green Party, East Kent Against Fracking, Kent Environment and Community Network and interested individuals including a planning consultant and a farmer.

The meeting enabled interested parties to discuss their response to fracking and share viewpoints and knowledge of the concerning risks and impacts of fracking. Potential benefits were also explored to balance the argument; although concern remained that the benefits were refutable and outweighed by the negative impacts and risks.

Fracking (or hydraulic fracturing) is the process of extracting shale gas by drilling 1,000 – 2,500 metres underground vertically and then up to 3,000 metres horizontally. A solution of more than two million gallons of water, sand and chemicals is pumped into the wellbore at high pressure to crack the shale rock to release natural gas. Drilling companies Cuadrilla, Magellan Petroleum Corporation and iGas Energy Ltd hold fracking licences that cover vast swathes of Sussex, Kent and Surrey.

The workshop's speakers were Andrew Ogden (CPRE Protect Kent), Georgia Wrighton (CPRE Sussex), Geoff Meaden (Kent Community and Environment Network), Rosie Rechter (East Kent Against Fracking), Brenda Pollack (Friends of the Earth) and Keith Taylor MEP.

Andrew Ogden, CPRE Protect Kent, outlined the potential risks and impacts of fracking, including increased traffic and noise, land use, visual intrusion and intensive water use, when in the South East, "not a drop can be spared". The risks noted included small earthquakes, water and air pollution which may pose a threat to human health and farming, and that investment may be diverted from developing renewable energy.

Georgia Wrighton, CPRE Sussex, emphasised the need to push for the precautionary principle to be used in strengthening regulation and policy. CPRE Sussex's stance is to call for a cautious approach (Precautionary Principle), until the effects of fracking have been fully explored. "Fracking is a major threat to the Sussex countryside; it's not only a risk to human health and wildlife, the issue is also the industrialisation of the countryside."

Geoff Meaden, Kent Community and Environment Network, said that in his view, "the greatest threat from fracking is climate change". The science and impacts of climate change were presented with an inescapable conclusion that was a point of consensus for all speakers: untapped shale gas reserves in the UK should stay underground and efforts should focus on lessening the UK's dependency on fossil fuels rather than fostering it.

Rosie Rechter, East Kent Against Fracking, expressed her concern about the lack of specific legislation in place to protect people and the environment. Rosie Rechter also contested the claim of jobs creation and cheap gas as many studies have shown this would not be the case; greener alternatives would yield more jobs overall and bills would not rise as steeply, therefore she concluded: "the benefits are non-existent as far as we can see."

Brenda Pollack, Friends of the Earth, referred to FoE's Clean British Energy campaign as one of their major campaigns to promote renewable energy, aiming for it to account for 75% of the UK's energy by 2030. "We rely on about 75% fossil fuels, a lot of our power stations are closing down in the next few decades so we need to be ready to replace them with renewable energy." For FoE, fracking would be counterproductive to this aim, as well as "unnecessary and unwanted".

Keith Taylor MEP, Green Party, indicated that the European Commission would soon publish reports about the impact of fracking on the environment and climate change. Meanwhile, it is concerning that there are signs the Government is keen to give fracking the go-ahead, as "there has to be an understanding of the risks before pursuing something." For those concerned by fracking, he recommended they sign a petition to the EC and contact their MP.

Recommendations

Recommendations from Keith Taylor MEP:

1. Write a petition to the European Parliament Petitions Committee (as Rosemary Rechter did), here's how
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00533cec74/Petitions.html>
2. Make a response to the European Commission consultation
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/consultations/uff_en.htm
3. Sign the Ecocide European Citizens Initiative at <http://www.endecocide.eu/>

Recommendations from Brenda Pollack, Friends of the Earth:

1. See for further information: www.foe.co.uk/campaignhubs/fracking
2. Attend upcoming fracking event (Manchester):

Using the planning system to fight fracking

Saturday 23 Feb, 11am - 4pm, Manchester
Green Fish Resource Centre in Manchester

Have a fracking site in your area? Or want to lobby your council to go Frack-free?
Find out how the planning system can support campaigns against fracking: what to do if there's an application for fracking in your area, how to influence your minerals and local plans, and how to get your council to introduce a policy against fracking. With FoE's planning advisor Naomi Luhde-Thompson and NW Campaigner Helen Rimmer.

Please email helen.rimmer@foe.co.uk to register or for more details.

**Report provided by Rosie Rechter, Co-ordinator of Deal With It
environmental action group – 25 February 2013.**