

OPENING STATEMENT

Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)
House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

“Hydraulic Fracturing: Banning Proven Technologies on Possibilities Instead of Probabilities”

April 23, 2015

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I am from Texas, and like you I am also pleased that the oil and gas industry has done so well during the Obama Administration’s tenure. However, I am also a nurse by training and I am sensitive to the need to protect the public health and the environment even as we develop new fossil fuel resources.

This hearing is advertised as being about the science of fracking, but the Majority’s witnesses consist of a state economic regulation and development official, a representative of a firm that was set up to run public relations for the fracking industry, and a scientist who has been paid by one of the largest fracking firms in the country. That does not sound like a promising panel to honestly examine scientific questions.

Looking at the Majority’s hearing materials and testimony, it is clear this is a hearing designed to give a platform for the fracking industry to attack those who question the safety of practices within that industry. In particular, there is a focus on undermining local communities that are considering, or perhaps have adopted, limits or bans on fracking.

More than 500 local communities, including some in my home state of Texas, have raised concerns about the practice of fracking and have considered, or passed, bans to restrict fracking activity. These are our constituents, who are dealing with real issues, with real environmental and public health implications. We should not belittle or diminish their concerns—or simply dismiss them as unsophisticated.

Instead, I am going to suggest that the answer to calming the fears of local communities is not to be found in attacking their motives or information, but through more transparency by industry and more effective regulation by states and the federal government.

People have concerns about the fracking industry because they can see it is largely unchecked. For example, in the state of Colorado, with over 52,000 active fracking wells, the state has only 40 inspectors. West Virginia has over 56,000 active wells and (as of 2011) just 20 inspectors. Pollution of drinking water, whether from fracking, or flawed construction of the well, or from surface waste from the site moving into aquifers, has occurred at least 248 times between 2008 and 2014 in Pennsylvania—we actually do not know how many incidents in total there have been because the state did not start collecting statistics on incidents until 2014.

If we had more transparency, more accountability and more oversight, local communities would be able to make well-informed choices. However, building an oversight hearing around a public relations campaign to dismiss the concerns of local communities not only does a disservice to Members of this committee, it also does nothing to increase trust of the fracking industry in those communities.

In closing, I would argue that it is not some “hypocritical smear campaign” by the Federal Government, but rather repeated attacks against EPA, and campaigns of doubt waged by an opaque industry, that have stoked mistrust among the American people. This hearing is likely to have the unintended consequence of further stoking mistrust among the American people.

Justice Louis Brandeis once said, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.” I couldn’t agree more. It is time that our local communities are provided with transparent information from industry to better understand the environmental and public health risks posed by hydraulic fracturing activities.

Mr. Chairman, I think the problem is not that local communities are given bad information from activists, it is that local communities cannot get accurate information about the environmental and health impacts resulting from oil and natural gas development using high volume fracking techniques.