

Aspen Ideas Fest audience decides natural gas boom doing more harm than good

By [Troy Hooper](#)

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ASPEN — After an Oxford-style debate Sunday night, environmental attorneys Deborah Goldberg and Katherine Hudson convinced 15 percent of the audience here to change their minds about hydraulic fracturing. Before the debate, only 38 percent of the audience agreed that the detriments of hydraulic fracturing are greater than its benefits but afterward, 53 percent agreed fracking does more harm than good.

“There are hundreds of millions of dollars being spent to ensure that this industry can continue to operate without the science and without the protections we need — \$320 million spent on lobbying the federal government in just two years,” Goldberg said. “As a result, what we are hearing now is not how we’re going to end our addiction to fossil fuels, but instead, a hundred years of gas. Now, a hundred years of gas is based on extracting every molecule of gas from all of our reserves, even those that we haven’t actually discovered yet, when it is well known that only about 10 percent of those reserves tend to be economically feasible to develop.”

On the other side of the debate were New York Times op-ed columnist Joe Nocera and former U.S. Department of Energy assistant secretary of policy Sue Tierney.

“Think about a world where you don’t have to worry about cartels, you don’t have to worry about being dependent on our enemies for oil, a world where foreign policy is not dictated by our need for oil,” Nocera said. “The ability of the United States to have its own resource once again in a way that we never thought we were going to is a tremendous gift that’s been handed to us, and fracking is the way that we’re taking advantage of it.”

The debate, [hosted by Intelligence Squared at the Aspen Ideas Festival](#), tapped into the controversial practice of fracking, in which millions of gallons of water, along with sand and chemicals, are pumped thousands of feet into the ground, under high pressure, to break up rock to release oil and gas. One byproduct of fracking, methane gas, is often released into the air and it can even pollute drinking water. Studies show there is an increased risk of cancer and other maladies for residents in gas-land areas.

“One, there will always be accidents, spills, mechanical failures, and human error,” said Hudson. “Two, the gas industry has consistently fought enforceable rules and there is insufficient state and federal staff to ensure compliance with what rules do exist. Three, the idea that the industry as a whole will comply with voluntary best practices — as I think our opponents have acknowledged — in the face of falling gas prices, is unlikely. Given the continued risk of harm and all of fracking’s costs weighed against its limited benefits for most, it is beyond dispute that the natural gas boom is doing more harm than good.”

A fracking operation under way near schools and homes in Erie, Colo. (Photo by Troy Hooper)

Tierney and Hudson called for a balanced energy outlook, one that embraces the promise of natural gas, which is abundant in the United States and burns more cleanly than traditional coal production. Natural gas is

also more affordable than many fuels and viewed as “a bridge fuel” to renewables, they said.

“What I really wish is that people would stop demonizing this fuel, because it makes it impossible to find sensible solutions in the middle,” she said. “There are sensible solutions in the middle. We should be working on enabling those to develop over time. Our main argument is that the two principal sources of energy in the United States, coal and oil, are much more damaging to the environment than is natural gas, and that’s for the communities where those are used as well as to the nation as a whole.”

The debate is being broadcast this month on National Public Radio, and it will be telecast on WNET on July 28, the same day as a celebrity-driven protest is planned in Washington, D.C., called “[Stop the Frack Attack](#).” The event will have three demands for Congress: stop dangerous fracking, close seven legal loopholes that exempt the oil and gas industry from parts of the Safe Drinking Water, Clean Air, and Clean Water Acts, and implement a pathway toward 100 percent clean renewable energy. The event will include Mark Ruffalo, Pete Seeger, Lois Gibbs, Bill McKibben, Ed Begley Jr., Ed Asner, Josh Fox, Gus Speth, Cornel West, Vandana Shiva, Holly Near, James Hansen, Dar Williams, Michael Kieschnick, Joe Uehlein, Margot Kidder and over 100 organizations and community groups.

Big and small governments across the country are grappling with ways to best regulate fracking, including North Carolina where on Monday night [a state representative mistakenly cast the wrong vote](#). Democrat Becky Carney accidentally pushed the green button when she meant to hit the red one. It was the deciding House vote and it ultimately meant that North Carolina will have to wait until it establishes rules for hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling for oil and gas exploration.

“Oh my gosh. I pushed green,” she reportedly said, blaming her gaffe on fatigue.

“I feel rotten, and I feel tired,” she added.

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