

Letter from the Editor – The fracking debate

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Hollywood, MD - The issue created by the drilling procedure hydraulic fracturing—known popularly and pejoratively as “fracking”—is on the table again in Annapolis. Fracking is a method of extracting resources such as natural gas and oil. The process has been around since the late 1940s. The area of Maryland where fracking is an immediate possibility is far Western Maryland, which is part of the Marcellus shale. The shale contains natural gas. Many of that region’s political leaders see opening properties to fracking as something that could prove to be a bonanza for landowners.

Currently, Maryland is under a two-year moratorium on fracking. The bills in the Maryland General Assembly hoppers call for a permanent ban on fracking or extending the moratorium another two years. So, you have environmentalists who want a permanent ban, bet-hedgers who want to buy more time to weigh the pros and cons by extending the moratorium, and unabashed capitalists who can’t wait to start drilling. The latter group will be pleased to see the moratorium lapse this fall.

It’s not an easy decision. Although it is a fossil fuel and nonrenewable, natural gas burns much cleaner than coal does. Western Maryland is a region that needs an economic engine and drilling for natural gas might be the solution. However, fracking has been cited as the culprit for more than a few environmental calamities, such as water supply contamination and earthquakes. Add to that the volatility of the product’s market and “fool’s gold” could become another label for natural gas to Western Marylanders.

It’s hard to say what should happen legislatively in Maryland on the subject of fracking. It’s probably easier to say what will happen. The moratorium is likely to be extended another two years. So now the question is, with the additional time bought, what will Maryland’s leaders do? Will there be serious discussion about how to plan for a future where different sources of energy are used? Wind and solar have as many drawbacks as fossil fuels. Even proactive environmentalists who rely on baseload power—electricity generated by coal and nuclear—to keep their web sites up and running must admit we are a long way from being able to totally phase out nonrenewable sources like natural gas. Also to be determined will be the geographic limits should the fracking moratorium ever be lifted.

Hedging your bets on this issue is not a bad strategy. Extend the fracking moratorium! It’s a decision that will displease extremists on both sides, which seems to frequently be the best possible decision to make.

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