



Natural Gas: A “Clean” Fossil Fuel?

As the debate over climate change and energy policy legislation heats up, the natural gas industry and its allies in Congress have taken to describing natural gas as a “clean bridge fuel” to a clean energy future, and are promoting various federal policies to encourage the wider use of natural gas.

Compared to the combustion of coal as a boiler fuel, natural gas is indeed a “cleaner” fuel. However, it is important to bear in mind that (a) according to the Energy Information Administration, 20 % of America’s present greenhouse gas emissions derive from the combustion of natural gas and (b) the extraction of natural gas can and does impose severe harmful impacts on air and water quality, the viability of wildlife habitats and wildlife populations, and the quality of the environment in areas where natural gas extraction activities take place.

The bottom line is: if our national energy policies encourage the wider use of natural gas to meet America’s future energy needs, production of natural gas must be “done right.”

“Doing it right” means that:

- Groundwater and drinking water supplies are protected from pollution by the toxic chemicals often used in the extraction of natural gas;
- Surface water quality is protected from natural gas exploration, construction, development and operational activities;
- Air quality is protected from ozone-forming emissions and other air pollutants that accompany natural gas development, and fugitive methane emissions from natural gas operations are minimized;
- Crucial wildlife habitats are protected from the severe degradation that can (and does) occur with the construction of road and pipeline networks, drill pads, waste disposal pits, and other infrastructure necessary to natural gas development;
- Wild landscapes and cultural sites more appropriate for their intrinsic natural and cultural values are placed off-limits to development; and
- In states where ownership of natural gas deposits is separated from surface ownership, the rights of surface owners to protect their lands and water rights are honored.

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