

opinion

Guest Commentary: Defining a safer clean-energy future

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By Mike Chiropolos

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Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary added more than 150 new words and phrases in 2011, including "social media," "crowdsourcing" and "bromance." Not included on the list were "hydraulic fracturing" or "fracking," but it seems likely they'll be added in 2012.

No energy or environmental issue grabbed the public attention last year more than fracking, the process of injecting pressurized fluids, chemicals and sands into the ground in order to extract oil or natural gas. Time magazine even went so far as to call fracking "the biggest environmental issue of 2011."

Coloradans became acutely aware of fracking as new drilling expanded along the Front Range, with plans to drill some 2,700 wells just north of Denver. Public protests popped up all over the Denver metro area, city councils started asking more questions, and in December the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission (COGCC) passed new regulations regarding disclosure of toxic chemicals used in the process.

Also in December, the Environmental

Protection Agency (EPA) released landmark new findings indicating water contamination from fracking in Wyoming. Instead of taking responsibility, EnCana launched a public relations campaign to discredit the EPA's scientific findings and obscure the fact that residents are getting sick from their groundwater wells. As if that weren't enough, already in 2012 we've seen widespread media coverage of minor earthquakes in Ohio that were blamed on hydraulic fracturing.

Western Resource Advocates has long shared the many concerns over fracking operations, and we have identified three important steps for 2012 to help ensure that Colorado neighborhoods and schools are adequately protected:

1. A mandatory program for baseline testing of water sources and mining operations, including the use of tracers for better monitoring of our water quality. Arguing over the reasons behind water contamination is not as important as identifying unsafe water sources as soon as possible. Establishing baseline conditions and tracing toxic



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constituents will put causation issues to rest so we can focus on remediating contamination when it occurs — and safeguarding water quality.

2. Increasing mandatory residential setbacks from the current minimum levels of 150 feet for rural areas and 350 feet for urban areas. The farther drilling and fracking operations are located from our homes, the less conflict and health impacts will result; setbacks also make it easier to respond to inevitable leaks and spills. In addition to water quality, fracking raises serious air quality concerns for anyone close to the drilling site. Minimum setbacks of a quarter-mile are more appropriate.

3. Implementation of the recommendations from a public-private committee dubbed "STRONGER," which released an in-depth review of Colorado hydraulic fracturing in October. Among the recommendations are a process to better protect groundwater quality and the need to understand where the industry will find the hundreds of millions of gallons of water needed for fracking — and how to dispose of the often-polluted "produced water" after the frack job.

Colorado should also consider why state law appears to strip local governments of the authority to regulate fracking locally. Why should local control extend to such uses as coal power plants or a cement factory, but not to industrial oil and gas drilling operations?

Natural gas in Colorado will continue to be an important transition fuel while we move away from harmful coal generation toward a cleaner energy economy relying primarily on

wind, solar, biomass and other renewable sources. There are also economic benefits to increased gas drilling, but we must be mindful of the potential costs to public health, quality of life and the environment.

We are entering a new era of oil and gas development in Colorado as drilling creeps ever closer to heavily-populated areas. More protections are needed to balance increased energy production with the health and well-being of our families.

Mike Chiropolos is the lands program director at Western Resource Advocates in Boulder (www.westernresources.org).

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