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NewScientist

New blow to UK fracking is a delay but not the end of the road

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Opencast coal mines were once routinely delayed by local councils amid unfounded health concerns. The same is happening with fracking, warns a professor of energy engineering

It is a relief to see that the pseudoscientific gobbledygook deployed against fracking has not prevailed. I say that despite the rejection of two high-profile attempts by energy firm Cuadrilla to win consent to explore for shale gas in Lancashire, UK.

The reasons given for rejecting the planning applications are the classic ones deployed against any development: worries about traffic on rural roads, noise and visual impact.

It's not so surprising, though. As an engineering geoscientist who has worked as a hydrogeologist and assessed planning applications to ensure they were compatible with protection of groundwater, I know there are relatively limited and well-defined grounds to legally reject an application.

Those grounds certainly do not include specious theories on hydrogeology repeated by anti-fracking protesters who equate this technique with groundwater contamination, but seem to have made no attempt to become acquainted with the [basics of the science](#).

A few decades ago, we had a very similar situation with opencast coal mining – even before the climate change implications of coal burning were a hot topic. Every time an opencast planning application was lodged, pseudoscientific objections would be made, alleging that it would be disastrous for the respiratory health of children. The fact that this had been [disproven](#) by exhaustive research never stopped the same old arguments being deployed.

Then, as now, local authorities found more mundane reasons to reject the proposals. But the reasons given seldom stood up to dispassionate scrutiny, and I suspect that the same will happen with fracking.

Rather, local councillors were so afraid of the backlash at the polls if they accepted an application that planning committees [routinely rejected](#) every one, thus forcing the matter to appeal, where a government planning inspector from outside the area would make the decision.

That way, councillors can always claim they opposed the development, but that the wicked central powers forced it through. The UK government knows how this works, of course, which is why it is calmly waiting for local councils to reject fracking and nuclear proposals so they can be processed nationally.

Conversely, or rather perversely, the new Tory administration is a passionate advocate of local democracy having the sole say when it comes to wind farms, comfortable in the knowledge that the Nimbys will prevail in that case. So it is all a game – albeit one that increases the length and cost of planning processes for us all, damaging the UK's desirability as an investment location.

Oddly, energy security seems forgotten in all this. Gas is not an alternative to wind or solar power - rather, the more of these you have, the more you need gas to fill the electricity supply gaps during calmer spells and at night. And 82 per cent of UK households, including most of Lancashire, [rely on gas for domestic heating and hot water](#).

Would we really rather import an increasing proportion of the gas we need - at greater cost and substantially greater carbon footprint – from countries such as Qatar, which are not noted for the kind of due process which we so enjoy in the UK?

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