

FINANCIAL TIMES

Letters

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Fracking debate sheds wilful ignorance

From Dr Mark A. Wolfgram.

Sir, A special thanks to Martin Wolf for a sober set of reflections on the potential trade-offs of “fracking” (“[Prepare for a golden age of gas](#)”, February 22). Mr Wolf cites an article in the November 2011 *Scientific American*, which “suggests that it is not yet known whether such [groundwater] contamination has occurred”. We should emphasise on this point that the Bush administration blinded the American public to any such knowledge by exempting the “fracking” industry from the Safe Drinking Water Act and ordering the Environmental Protection Agency not to investigate any such potential claims. The Obama administration has at least allowed the EPA to investigate, and we finally have a draft report on the “Investigation of Ground Water Contamination near Pavillion, Wyoming”, which was released in December 2011.

From the executive abstract, the report notes: “Detection of high concentrations of benzene, xylenes, gasoline range organics, diesel range organics, and the total purgeable hydrocarbons in ground water samples from shallow monitoring wells near [the waste] pits indicates that pits are a source of shallow groundwater contamination in the area of investigation.”

Contamination was also found in deeper sources of groundwater. “Alternative explanations were carefully considered to explain individual sets of data. However, when considered together with other lines of evidence, the data indicates likely impact to groundwater that can be explained by hydraulic fracturing.”

The report also helps to explain why residents across the US who live close to drilling sites have been setting their tap water on fire and becoming ill while taking a shower: “Elevated levels of dissolved methane in domestic wells generally increase in those wells in proximity to gas production wells.”

A decade has been wasted and a great deal of damage has been done. Now the Obama administration, and other governments, must act to protect the public interest. This does not mean a complete ban on the practice, but it does mean that having overcome our wilful ignorance we must behave differently.

By the way, *Scientific American* reported in January that the Ohio earthquakes were probably caused by fracking. But who knows, perhaps Americans may like their groundwater *gazeuse*, and shaken, not stirred.

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