



UNISON Scotland response: Talking Fracking - Scottish Government consultation on unconventional oil and gas

Introduction

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. We are the largest trade union in the gas and electricity sectors as well as in local government, health and water – all sectors with a specific interest in this issue. All our members have an interest in the future of the communities that could be impacted by fracking, as well as the wider economic and environmental impact on Scotland.

UNISON Scotland has held detailed discussions on this issue over a lengthy period and the outcome of that debate is reflected in this response. We welcome the Scottish Government's consultation and the associated research.

Overview

UNISON Scotland is opposed to fracking and we do not believe the case has been made to lift the current moratorium. We have three main grounds for reaching this view.

Safety

We should follow the precautionary principle in terms of safety when the evidence is inconclusive. This is rooted in Scotland's industrial heritage as anyone suffering from asbestosis or other industrial diseases understands all too well. Fracking in the wide open spaces of the USA has highlighted significant safety and health concerns. In Scotland fracking will take place under people's homes in densely populated areas.

Economy

There is considerable doubt that gas from fracking is even economically viable. Many experts doubted the financial case, even before the falling price of gas. We believe the claimed job numbers are inflated and claims for other energy sources have rarely delivered what was promised. Scotland's economic pitch to the world should not be based on dirty jobs.

Environment

We should not compromise Scotland's climate change targets, or the UK's broader commitment to limiting global climate change. Scotland should be leading the world in moving to clean renewable power, not aiming to extract ever more inaccessible fossil fuels. The risk is that shale gas doesn't just replace imported gas – it replaces renewables.

The arguments for and against fracking will continue and the research evidence on safety and economic benefit is considerably short of being conclusive. The key issue is do we want a Scotland that focuses on clean energy, or return to dirty fossil fuels. On those grounds alone, there remains a strong case to ban fracking.

Consultation questions

Q1: What are your views on the potential social, community and health impacts of an unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland?

There have been more than 700 health studies in relation to fracking and more than 80% of them document risks or actual harms. These risks include: respiratory problems; spills and accidents; problems with pregnancy; noise and stress. For example, researchers from the University of Missouri found hormone-disrupting chemicals in the surface water near a fracking waste water disposal facility in West Virginia. Another US cross university study found that the noise levels from US fracking operations were high enough to cause annoyance and disturb sleep such as to increase blood pressure, hypertension and heart disease (PSE Dec 2016)

There is growing evidence of a variety of health problems being associated with fracking. Common sense dictates that drinking and breathing cancer-causing agents will take its toll. Therefore the precautionary principle should apply, especially when we have other, cleaner energy options.

The main advocate and potential user of fracking output in Scotland is the petrochemical giant Ineos at Grangemouth. It has been condemned for its “poor” environmental performance for the second year running following a series of pollution blunders. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (Sepa) has given the plant one of its lowest performance ratings because of nine incidents that caused pollution in 2016. The plant was also assessed as poor in 2015.

Q2: What are your views on the community benefit schemes that could apply, were an unconventional oil and gas industry to be developed in Scotland?

Public opinion remains opposed to fracking even with community and individual financial benefit. A YouGov poll after the government announcement found that only a third of those surveyed said they would support fracking in their local area “if individual households received a direct payment in exchange” of up to £10,000. More than 43% said they were opposed, 26% of them “strongly”. Another quarter said they didn’t know whether they supported it or not. The greatest opposition is in Scotland where 51% are opposed.

Joseph Dutton from the University of Exeter is even sceptical that significant household payments can be delivered. He argues: “that the ultimate value of the fund and therefore the payments it would distribute is wholly dependent on the tax regime in place when production begins, and the revenue a company derives from a shale gas site once costs are taken into account. Until actual gas production begins, it’s impossible to estimate how much tax the operating company will pay – or even if the shale industry would be a success in the UK at all.” He also makes the point that as the price of oil and gas has plummeted in the last two years, the economic case for developing potentially expensive shale gas deposits has weakened.

DECC surveys and other opinion polls confirm public opposition to fracking in general.

Q3: What are your views on the potential impact of unconventional oil and gas industry on Scotland's economy and manufacturing sector?

We are sceptical of inflated job claims for most energy sources based on long experience in the sector. For example, according to the drilling company Cuadrilla, each of its proposed 6-year projects in Lancashire that were rejected by the council would only have created 11 jobs.

We believe the economic case for shale gas has been overstated. It is unlikely that the low prices in the United States will be duplicated in Scotland, given the more complex extraction and higher regulatory standards. A study by Deutsche Bank suggested that: "those waiting for a shale-gas "revolution" outside the US will likely be disappointed, in terms of both price and the speed at which high-volume production can be achieved".

There are job implications in the shift from fossil fuel industries to a green economic strategy. For that reason UNISON Scotland supports a Just Transition Plan and we will cover this in more detail in our response to the energy strategy.

Q4 What are your views on the potential role of unconventional oil and gas in Scotland's energy mix?

UNISON Scotland supports a balanced energy policy and we will set out the measures necessary to achieve this aim in our response to the energy strategy consultation. We support the ambition that at least half of all Scotland's energy needs come from renewable sources by 2030. We accept that gas has a role to play in that strategy, but do not see the need to open up new fossil fuel reserves to do so, especially any unconventional oil and gas resources.

The cross-party House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee concluded; "Any large scale extraction of shale gas in the UK is likely to be at least 10-15 years away, and therefore cannot drive dirtier coal from the energy system because by that time it is likely that unabated coal-fired power generation will have been phased out to meet EU emissions directives".

Rather than replacing coal, leading academics (Warwick Business School 2015) have concluded that "in the UK a danger of promoting the increased use of gas for electricity generation is that there may be a stalling in the necessary shift towards lower-carbon sources of electricity"

Q5: What are your views on the potential environmental impacts of an unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland?

There are well-founded concerns for the environment, based on evidence from the US and Australia. The French and Bulgarian governments and a growing number of US states have banned fracking. The UN Environment Programme says even if fracking is done properly, it may cause unavoidable environmental impacts.

Unconventional gas extraction can produce significantly higher greenhouse gas emissions than ordinary natural gas. Methane leakage from the industry has led scientists in the USA (EIP March 2016) to assert that the carbon impact of fracked gas can be worse than coal.

Evidence from the USA shows that around 6% of fracking wells leak immediately. Some 50% of conventional oil and gas wells leak within 30 years – but fracking hasn't been around long enough for this kind of data to exist for fracking wells.

Leaking wells also lead to a risk of water contamination and add to the pressure on water resources in some areas. Lord Smith, former chair of the Environment Agency, has said this is the biggest risk posed by fracking. The US Environmental Protection Agency's latest study (Dec 2016) confirms that fracking has some potential to impact on drinking water resources and lists a range of chemicals that have reached the water supply. While they conclude that these have not been pervasive, they have been unable to estimate the national frequency. This reinforces the case for the precautionary principle to apply.

We support the concerns expressed by RSPB that drilling activity, construction noise and the increased movements of vehicles and people are all likely to have adverse impacts on our wildlife. These activities would have negative wider community impact and damage tourism and the local economy.

Q6: What are your views on the potential climate change impacts of unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland?

Shale gas and shale oil are fossil fuels that emit greenhouse gases. There is a clear scientific consensus that to stop dangerous climate change, 80% of fossil fuels that we know about need to stay in the ground. To head off the worst impacts of climate change means getting off fossil fuels as soon as possible. Setting up a whole new fossil fuel industry is going in completely the wrong direction, if the Scottish Government is serious about meeting its ambitious climate change targets.

Research in the USA (EIP March 2016), led by the former director of the Environmental Protection Agency even disputes the industry's argument that fracking is a relatively clean fuel that can act as a bridge to renewables. This study points to the leakage of methane and other greenhouse gases during the process. When these are added, shale gas can create even more pollution than coal.

Q7: What are your views on the regulatory framework that would apply to an unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland?

There would need to be an extensive regulatory framework if fracking was allowed in Scotland. That would place a heavy burden on already overstretched regulatory bodies and the staff that UNISON represents.

Q8: Overall, and in light of the available evidence, what do you think would be the main benefits, if any, of an unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland?

Q9: Overall, and in light of the available evidence, what do you think would be the main risks or challenges, if any, of an unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland?

We can see few, if any, benefits associated with an unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland. The risks and challenges far outweigh these. The primary disadvantage of extracting new fossil fuel reserves is that it runs counter to our national and global obligations to cut our carbon emissions. A ban would help prevent Scotland being locked into a fossil fuel future and act as an incentive to those wishing to invest in renewables. Scotland's economic future should be associated with clean, green industries.

We agree with our partners in the SCCS coalition that Scotland, and the world community, should make the fastest possible transition to clean, sustainable, renewable energy. The introduction of a further source of fossil fuels in competition with renewables will be likely to hinder that transition.

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