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Nature defends natural gas story over EIA objections

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Eric Gay

North Dakota Oil Boom

Oil pump jacks work behind a natural gas flare, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014, near Watford City, N.D. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

Posted: Friday, December 19, 2014 12:21 pm | Updated: 12:27 pm, Fri Dec 19, 2014.

By Joshua Cain | Houston Chronicle | 1 comment

A Nature article from early December questioning how long the North American natural gas boom could really last earned stinging letters this week from federal and Texas researchers whose work was the basis for the story.

The letters from the U.S. Energy Information Administration and the University of Texas at Austin's Bureau of Economic Geology claimed that Nature's story, "Natural gas: The fracking fallacy," misrepresented data projecting natural gas production levels over the next three decades.

The story claimed the BEG's data showed that industry and EIA forecasts were too optimistic, and that natural gas production could decline sharply past 2020.

Nature defended the story, with features editor Richard Monastersky saying in an email to Fuel Fix that the journal "stands by its reporting and the accuracy of the news feature."

"It is appropriate for Nature to report on ongoing research into shale gas resources and to communicate information that it believes is in the public interest," Monastersky said. "Nature's article did discuss uncertainties in all such projections or forecasts, and noted that the EIA produces a variety of cases or scenarios."

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But EIA Deputy Administrator Howard Gruenspecht wrote that Nature's report was "filled with inaccurate and distorted reporting," and used the discrepancy between the two data sets to create "a (false) conflict meme." He said that EIA collaborates with research

groups like BEG to come up with ranges of scenarios for future natural gas production.

Both the EIA and BEG were critical of how the story leaned on comments from one researcher who worked on the study, Tad Patzek, the director of petroleum engineering at UT at Austin. Patzek said in the story that the Texas researchers' findings were "bad news" for the industry.

BEG Director Scott Tinker said in his letter that Patzek's role in the study was limited. And Gruenspecht noted in the EIA letter that Patzek was an advocate of the "peak oil" theory claiming that there's a ceiling on hydrocarbon production.

Monastersky said that Nature gave EIA the opportunity to respond to some of the issues that were later raised in its letter, but didn't get a response.

Gruenspecht downplayed the role of EIA's data projections in serving as forecasts for the industry in an interview with Fuel Fix.

"These companies are investing tens of millions of dollars in what they do. I'm sure they do their own work," Gruenspecht said.

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Lad posted at 12:47 am on Sat, Dec 20, 2014.

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Natural gas is a better hydrocarbon than coal for generating electricity in that coal also pollutes the waterways with mountains of heavy metal ash residue and spreads fly ash in the atmosphere; Natural gas makes a good intermediate source of energy and a good bridge to continue electricity production until renewables can replace its utilization.

Oil and natural gas will be used forever since it is a feedstock to produce many useful products including tires and petrochemicals. Eventually, fuel products from oil and gas will not be needed any where close to the amount used today; it will be replace by battery electric vehicles charged from power created by renewables.

This transition will take time and as you see by this article, the legacy energy stakeholders will fight to maintain the status quo as long as they can continue making profits, using any means necessary to keep the gravy train rolling. The hydrocarbon industries will die hard and long; but, continuing makes little sense in the long run and they will eventually see the wisdom in investing in renewables and curtailing hydrocarbon mining.

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