

THE JEFFERSON JOURNAL

...a commentary from

THE THOMAS JEFFERSON INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Why Restrict Energy Development in George Washington National Forest?

By Michael W. Thompson

8/25/2013 -- Oil Sheikhs finance Hollywood movies against it. HBO “documentaries” are made about it. TV “news” complains about it. Opposing it is the latest cause celeb in environmental politics. What can cause such a commotion? It is hydraulic fracturing, a process essential to our nation’s natural gas future. The battle over this process is now focused right here in Virginia.

At issue is whether the U.S. Forest Service should allow the potential – *the potential* -- of hydraulic fracturing development as part of the George Washington National Forest’s revised management plan.

Oil and natural gas are already developed in Virginia and regulated by Virginia’s Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy. In the George Washington National Forest (GWNF), development also is governed by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management regulations. The Forest’s management plan is up for review and the Forest Service is considering whether that plan should ban, restrict, or include the possibility of hydraulic fracturing.

We heard a great deal about natural gas development as an essential part of Virginia’s energy mix when the Thomas Jefferson Institute held a forum about “Virginia’s Energy Future” in July. This forum was an opportunity to discuss the potential contribution of electricity, coal, nuclear, natural gas, and offshore development to our economy. While everyone agreed that energy development should be safe, what was clear was that natural gas was considered by all participants to be beneficial to our state economy.

It’s time for a responsible policy to prevail on the GW National Forest fracking issue and not worry about what Hollywood movie-moguls want. The groups opposed to including fracking in the updated plan refer to this as “something new.” However, allowing oil and natural gas operations in the George Washington Forest is not new. The previous management plan allowed such development as part of the Agency’s multiple use mandate. Permitting the use of hydraulic fracturing under the new management plan would not necessarily mean this method would be used, but simply preserves it as an option for future policy decisions.

National forests throughout the U.S. allow hydraulic fracturing. In fact, horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing are not banned in the Jefferson National Forest, which borders the GWNF, and which underwent a plan revision in 2004. Over a dozen gas wells are producing in the Jefferson National Forest and the Forest Service did not identify any concerns with those

9035 Golden Sunset Lane ■ Springfield, Virginia 22153 ■ 703/440-9447 ■ info@thomasjeffersoninst.org

wells in the GWNF plan development. National forests are administered by the U.S. Forest Service, a department of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for a reason – they are designed for multiple uses, including recreation, logging, mining, and energy development. These are not wilderness areas that are to remain untouched. Hydraulic fracturing is a common occurrence in national forests around the country and has been used safely for decades. The Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy (DMME) reports that hydraulic fracturing has been utilized in approximately 1,800 wells drilled in Southwest Virginia since the early to mid-1950's without any documented instances of surface water or groundwater degradation in Virginia. Nationally, over a million wells have been hydraulically fractured. This is a process that is used routinely, and not a single confirmed case of groundwater contamination is attributed to it, regardless of what a Middle East financed Hollywood movie portrays. Hydraulic fracturing technology continues to improve as does its safety.

Thanks to hydraulic fracturing, our nation has increased production of oil and natural gas by more than 25% over the past five years. That's energy we don't need to import from overseas.

In states such as Pennsylvania, the shale gas industry, enabled by hydraulic fracturing, supports 234,000 jobs. The geology of Pennsylvania differs from Virginia, so it's difficult to tell whether something similar can happen here. One thing is certain, however – if hydraulic fracturing is banned in the George Washington National Forest, it will deny us this option and the energy supplies and employment that might result.

The Forest Service should preserve the possibility of hydraulic energy development in the George Washington National Forest. It should preserve the possibility of this option if it is economically feasible. Job creation here in Virginia and helping our nation's energy security are powerful arguments to include hydraulic fracking as a possible alternative in the George Washington National Forest -- just as it is allowed in our country's other national forests.

-30-

Michael Thompson is Chairman/President of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, Virginia's premier independent public policy foundation. These views are his and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute or its Board of Directors. He can be reached at info@thomasjeffersoninst.org.