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Frack-free state

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It's one of the most hotly debated issues of our time, primarily because the stakes are so high on either side.

Nowhere is that more true than New York, where Gov. Andrew Cuomo made headlines last December when he announced a state-wide ban on hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. Some regional leaders have loudly complained about the move, while many environmentalists scored it a victory.

The problem with fracking is that while it's been around for years - states such as Pennsylvania are maggoty with these short-term natural gas wells - studies of its impact are still far from conclusive. The only thing really known is that it has created a whole new boom in fossil fuels and contributed to a global collapse in the price of other energy sources.

While this province awaits the findings of its own fracking panel, investigations in jurisdictions such as Nova Scotia and New York show a trend towards erring on the side of caution.

This month, New York released the research that backed up its decision last year. It's a dense 2,000-page tome that examines everything from economic benefits to possible environmental and health impacts.

One factor that was not clearly known even only a year ago is the potential for tremors and earthquakes.

As Climate Central reported last week, new evidence in this area played a big role in the state's decision.

"Last month, the U.S. Geological Survey published a study showing that oil and gas development, specifically deep underground injection of wastewater from fracking operations, made Oklahoma more seismically active than California in 2014, posing a major risk to life and property."

Such quakes would not only threaten to disrupt water supplies and cause other environmental problems, but could damage infrastructure in states where building codes don't account for such events.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the research for New York is that consideration was given to the likelihood that increased fracking would tend to supplant or at least delay the need to seek more renewable forms of energy. Not only does fracking continue to increase greenhouse gases, but it may only kick the fuel can down the road a few more decades.

"But natural gas produced using fracking is also leading to the displacement of carbon-heavy coal as the nation's primary fuel for electric power generation," the Climate Central article noted.

Again, the situation is by no means black and white.

One thing is for sure: this province's fracking panel just got a whole new mountain of evidence to mull over.

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