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## Guest Commentary: Hydraulic fracturing is safe, key to energy goals

By Kathleen Sgamma

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In the past 10 years, natural gas producers of the Intermountain West have been able to increase supplies of the clean-burning natural gas that Americans rely on every day to light their offices, heat their homes, and power their factories.

Natural gas production in our region will become even more important as President-elect Barack Obama and the 111th Congress seek to fulfill their campaign promises of making our nation less dependent on foreign sources of energy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Ninety-seven percent of the natural gas consumed in the U.S. is produced in North America (27 percent of it in the West), and since it emits just over half the CO<sub>2</sub> of coal, we will need even more natural gas in order to reduce our carbon footprint in coming years.

Western producers have increased natural gas supplies by 69 percent since 1997 while further reducing the small and temporary environmental impacts of development through advanced technologies such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing, or fracing.

Fracing is a safe, well-tested technology that has been used to develop energy for over 60 years. This technology is used thousands of times each year with an exemplary safety record, and has enabled us to increase our natural gas reserves by 13 percent in 2007 alone.

Since nearly every well drilled in the Intermountain West requires the use of fracing, it's important that the public understand how this technology works. Fracing occurs many thousands of feet below freshwater aquifers, and protective metal piping surround wells at the depths where freshwater is found. Like all procedures surrounding the development of energy, fracing is already regulated by literally hundreds of local, state, and federal laws.

Westerners should not take to heart alarmist claims that fracing is dangerous. Studies have shown that fracing is safe and effective. In fact, since fracing was first used in 1948, there has not been a single documented case of contamination of drinking water, and studies conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency under both the Clinton and Bush administrations have found that fracing is a safe method for extracting vital domestic energy resources.

Ninety-nine percent of fracing fluids consist simply of water and sand, and the 1 percent of chemicals they contain are already strictly regulated. These fluids are being injected into rocks that contain oil and natural gas, and not near aquifers. There are no documented cases of those fluids migrating into drinking water wells.

Because fracing has just recently come on the radar of environmental groups, there is much misinformation currently circulating on this technology. Unfortunately, due to lack of industry knowledge, some have incorrectly assumed that fracing has the ability to interface with underground drinking water sources, when in reality, it cannot. All surface water spills are already regulated by the EPA as well as state and local governments. Oil and natural gas operators must report spills of any fluids, even very small spills that result in no contamination.

Blaming such incidents on fracing and mischaracterizing the cases as hazardous to public health is an unfair attempt to frighten the public into thinking a well-regulated process is somehow dangerous. There is a much greater environmental and security risk from transporting energy resources from overseas than producing them here in the U.S. under our current strict environmental regime.

As Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, stated in 2002, "hydraulic fracturing . . . is a valuable tool in reducing our dependence on foreign energy supplies."

At a time when our nation needs more natural gas in order to address the dual challenges of climate change and energy security, hydraulic fracturing is a vital technology for meeting that demand. Attempts to add to the extensive layers of regulation will result in higher costs to consumers and hinder our nation's goals of increasing energy security and controlling greenhouse gas emissions.

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