

What is fracking? Public awareness of shale gas extraction is low

July 9 2012, By Tara De Cozar



Public awareness of fracking – the method of extracting shale gas — is low, despite high levels of coverage of the controversial process in the media, a new study has found. And while people link fracking to earthquakes and water contamination, more than half of those questioned believe shale gas extraction should be allowed in the UK.

Three YouGov surveys carried out in March, April and June 2012 found that, even with the sustained coverage in the mainstream print and broadcast media, just 39-45% of respondents knew what shale gas was.

The research was funded by and carried out at The University of Nottingham, across the Schools of Geography, Sociology and Social Policy, and Politics and International Relations.

In the March survey just 38% of respondents correctly identified shale gas as being extracted by fracking (or hydraulic fracturing) from a list of real and imaginary fossil fuels. Around the same proportion (39%)

were ‘don’t knows’, and 17% believed the fossil fuel was ‘coal’ — the next most popular choice after shale.

Recognition rose some 7% to nearly 45% in the April survey, which was conducted shortly after the release of the Preese Hall Report (which concluded that fracking had caused earthquake activity, and resulted in a significant level of media interest and a flurry of reports) but this fell to just over 40% in the June survey.

The surveys also found that the vast majority of respondents who correctly identified shale gas associated the gas with earthquakes, with the figure rising from just under 59% in March to nearly 71% in April, but falling back to under 65% in the June survey. A significant number of people also associate shale gas with water contamination, although this figure dropped from 44.5% to less than 41% between March and April. It is clear that a significant proportion (around 44-45%) of the people surveyed do not consider shale gas to be a clean fuel.

Despite this, many respondents thought that fracking for shale gas is acceptable. In the June survey an additional question asked individuals who had identified shale gas to state whether they thought that extracting natural gas from shale should be allowed. Nearly 53% of all respondents were in favour with a further 20% stating that they did not know. Only 27% of our respondents stated that natural gas should not be extracted from shale.

Sarah O’Hara, Professor of Geography at The University of Nottingham, led the study.

“The results are surprising,” she said “[Fracking](#) has had a high profile in the media in recent months, but well over half of the population don't know what it is.”

“Moreover, there is clearly a lot of uncertainty about the potential impacts of shale gas on the environment and whilst there appears to be concern about its link to earthquakes and water contamination, most people do not know if it will have an impact on greenhouse gas emissions and those that express a view are fairly evenly divided as to whether it has a positive or negative impact.”

“Significantly shale gas is viewed as being a cheap energy source and over half the people who are familiar with shale gas believe we should be allowed to extract it in the UK.”

The full text of the report Shale gas extraction in the UK: what the people think is [available online](#).

Provided by University of Nottingham

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