

Environmental Audit Committee

14 Tothill Street, London, SW1P 3JA

Tel 020 7219 4524 Email eacom@parliament.uk Website www.parliament.uk/eacom

Matthew Bell
Chief Executive
Committee on Climate Change
7 Holbein Place
London SW1W 8NR

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Fracking and climate change

I am writing on behalf of the Environmental Audit Committee to seek the Committee on Climate Change's current assessment of the risks to our emissions reduction commitments under the Climate Change Act and the carbon budgets regime from prospective fracking of shale gas deposits in the UK.

On 26 January we published our report on the [Environmental risks of fracking](#), to inform the Report-stage and Third Reading debates that day on the Infrastructure Bill. We identified a range of views on the environmental risks of fracking, including evidence that presented sufficient uncertainties to warrant a halt to exploration on the precautionary principle. We noted that those uncertainties were exacerbated by a fragmented regulatory framework for environmental safeguarding — one, furthermore, which had not been tested in the fracking extraction phase or at scale. The [Royal Society and Royal Academy of Engineering](#), like others, have tied their observations on environmental risks to “operational best practices [being] implemented and enforced through regulation”. They distinguished between the environmental risks of small-scale exploratory wells and the greater uncertainty from larger-scale production if a future shale gas industry develops nationwide, and concluded that “attention must be paid to the way in which risks scale up”.

Our report also concluded that fracking would be inconsistent with our carbon emissions obligations, and this is why I am now writing to you. There was a range of views on this issue expressed in the debate on the Infrastructure Bill, and more widely. In part, views appear to have hinged on the question of timescales. If fracking production was underway now it might produce less greenhouse gas than coal and even imported conventional gas in lifecycle terms. However, that leaves open the issue of whether gas from UK fracking would add or subtract from total emissions in the 10-15 year time horizon needed for fracking to reach a significant scale to be able to compete with other energy sources (except for coal which would by then have been phased-out in any case)

We considered that the risks are sufficient to need a change in the main objective of the Government's proposed petroleum strategy — to “ensure that fossil fuel emissions are limited to the carbon budgets advised by the Committee on Climate Change, and introduce a moratorium on the hydraulic fracturing of shale gas deposits in order to reduce the risk of carbon budgets being breached” — rather than the Government proposed objective simply of “maximising the economic recovery of UK petroleum”. Some MPs, including some Members of our

Committee, put their name to [Amendment 68](#) which sought that adjustment to the Bill.

Our report has succeeded in taking the debate forward on the link between fracking and carbon budgets, and that debate needs to be resolved, not least as we await the return of the Infrastructure Bill to the Commons for its final stages. We would be grateful if the Committee on Climate Change could provide an assessment of the likely impact of UK fracking on the carbon budgets, now and in the future, including your view on when fracking might reach a level at which cumulative emissions might contribute to a breach of the carbon budgets. We would also welcome your assessment of the Government's '[New Clause 15](#)' added to the Bill on 26 January ([now embedded 'After Clause 43' in the revised Bill before the Lords](#)); in particular (i) the utility of New Clause 15 and how it would operate, and whether you were consulted on it; and (ii) whether you see any challenges or inconsistency in providing the regular advice on the carbon budget impact from onshore extraction envisaged by NC-15 and your existing requirement to advise on future carbon budget levels and Government progress against the budgets, including whether the obligations on the Government under NC-15 to follow your "advice" are strong enough.

We would also appreciate it if, assuming that NC-15 were already operational, you were able to comment at this stage on the potential carbon budget impact of Government support for infrastructure investment linked to gas production already in place, such as the finance guarantees for the INEOS gas processing facilities at Grangemouth.

Joan Walley MP
Chair, Environmental Audit Committee