

Big Surprise: Energy Industry Has a Best Friend in the Oval Office

Last week I had the opportunity to attend the annual Shale Insight fracking conference in Pittsburgh. During my two days there, it was made quite clear that the industry feels optimistic about the Trump Administration's environmental deregulation plans, which were confirmed during the closing keynote address by former press secretary Sean Spicer. "This industry has a huge friend in the Oval Office," he told the frackers in his opening remarks.

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Spicer also blustered that under the Trump Administration you will see Secretaries Zinke and Perry working together to produce massive yields of oil and gas from public lands in an "environmentally responsible way" — even though we know that shale development is definitely [not environmentally responsible](#).

Indeed, a lot of false claims were thrown around. During a public health panel I heard the Executive Vice President and CEO of MarkWest Energy Partners, say that the

"steps our industry takes to protect ground and surface water is impressive."

Though, I suspect that residents in [Dimock, Pennsylvania](#); [Pavillion, Wyoming](#); and [Parker County, Texas](#) would disagree.

A lot of false claims were thrown around: like that shale gas development is good for [public health](#).

This sentiment was reinforced by a man named Walter Hufford, who currently works as a director at RESPOL, who has worked for the oil and gas industry for years, and who also served as a member of the U.S. EPA's Science Advisory Board that drafted the agency's study on fracking's impacts on drinking water.

Last year, after revising the June 2015 version of the study, the [EPA finally admitted](#) that [fracking can contaminate drinking water](#), a finding that Hufford [dissented](#). During Shale Insight, he told the audience that the purpose of the EPA's review of fracking's impact on drinking water is "all because of movies ... and allegations," boasting that the EPA "needs more experts from the industry."



Perhaps all this exaggeration, or flat out lying, is needed to boost the industry's morale. A re-occurring theme in the keynotes, panels, and sessions is that there is an urgent need to build out [pipelines, petrochemical plants and associated infrastructure, and export facilities](#).

This emphasis may be reflective of the fracking industry's struggling sector.

Petrochemical manufacturing turns ethane (a hydrocarbon present in natural gas) into ethylene, [which is then converted into plastics](#). In the past few years, fracking has produced an oversupply of this ethane, and beginning in 2012, chemical companies started investing in petrochemical plants and export facilities to tap the ethane glut.

This ethane, which is bountiful in the northeastern Appalachia's Utica and Marcellus shale gas reserves, is a boon for the plastics industry. At Shale Insight, Perc Pineda, an economist with the Plastics Industry Association said, "the capacity to produce ethylene – from 2010 to 2020 is expected to grow by more than 60% – according to ACC and that will benefit plastics manufacturing." However, plastics production is inherently wasteful; the largest sector is packaging, which creates [materials that are immediately thrown away](#).



Thus, it was no surprise when there was a lot of buzz around a new petrochemical facility, called an ethane cracker, coming to Beaver County, Pennsylvania – as well as the potential for an ethane storage hub in either Ohio, West Virginia or Pennsylvania. It was even suggested during the conference that there may be additional plastics companies that move into the Appalachian region. But of course, these new facilities mean there will need to be even more pipeline infrastructure. And [transforming ethane into plastics and other products is inherently toxic](#), so welcoming them in also means polluting the environment and imposing public health risks on petrochemical workers and the communities near the plants.

It appears the industry workers representing the tri-state area of Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania think that producing petrochemicals, making plastics, building pipelines and [exporting gas](#) are the panacea to their problems – an overabundance of gas from which they cannot profit without new markets or new products.

However, there is another obstacle they will have to overcome: residents across the country that are mobilizing to stop drilling and fracking, as well as the [construction of new and expansion of existing pipelines](#) and associated infrastructure.

Direct action seems to really fluster the industry.

The fracking industry is definitely feeling the heat. They even had a breakout session titled "Managing Protests Effectively: Working with Law Enforcement to Safely Manage Demonstrations," where a panel of police officers admitted there is nothing they have can do to stop peaceful, legal protests. But, for the most part, much of the session revolved around direct action, a form of protesting that seems to really fluster the industry.



A retired Pennsylvania state trooper told the industry that, in his opinion, the "Dakota Access Pipeline invigorated protest activities across the board" and with an increased focus on the [Mariner East](#) and [Atlantic Sunrise](#) pipelines, he doesn't see direct action going away anytime soon. While a West Virginia officer suspects there will be an increase in protests in his state with "some of the relaxed regulations."

Overall, the speeches and the rest of the conference made three things clear.

1. The industry is banking on the Trump Administration's environmental deregulations to help streamline permitting processes and increase drilling and fracking.
2. They need new infrastructure and exports to thrive.
3. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the ever-growing [movement against oil and gas fracking and infrastructure](#) is a major industry problem and it is not easy for them to solve.

Our organizing efforts are working so let's continue to build our movement's scope and power and keep the energy industry on their toes.

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