

Will South Africa Allow Shale Gas “Hydraulic Fracking” in the Karoo?

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South Africa is possibly moving forward with a plan to allow Shell Oil Company to explore and develop natural gases through the highly controversial ‘Hydraulic Fracking’ technology in the region of Karoo. The South African based company that produces liquid fuels, chemicals and electricity ‘Sosal’ is optimistic that the shale gas industry would develop under the current government. Australia’s Sunbird Energy has been exploring and developing oil and gas projects in South Africa, notably the Ibhubesi Gas Field in the West coast.

Fracking is a water-intensive process where millions of gallons of fluids of water, sand, and chemicals (some known to cause cancer) are injected underground at high-pressure to fracture rocks surrounding an oil or gas well. This releases the extra oil and gas from the rock that flows directly into the well. Establishing new well sites also takes drilling and encasing the well where the process of fracking begins. It uses trucks that operate heavy equipment and material that is needed to remove toxic waste. Where toxic waste will be disposed of is another issue. Fracking contributes to air and water pollution and devalues the land it operates on. Fracking technology threatens the air we breathe and the water we drink. But the South African government and Sasol are interested in developing the economy, but fracking technology poses numerous health risks and in the long-term destroys the environment. Karoo has a number of towns that amounts to a population of 71, 000 who live in close proximity to the proposed fracking sites that are dependent of natural ground water. The decision to allow fracking would cause major problems as acid drainage from the mines would contaminate food and water supplies.

In a report by iafrica.com, an online news source stated that

“Sasol is keen to invest in South Africa’s shale gas industry once it gets going, the petrochemical group’s CEO David Constable said. The move could challenge major oil player Royal Dutch Shell, which is reportedly one of the front runners to explore the Karoo area for shale gas.”

The Karoo is a natural region that consists of two main areas. The Little Karoo is often associated as the wet Karoo and the Great Karoo consists of mainly dessert. Fracking is proposed for the latter. *“Fracking in the Karoo could unlock one of the world’s biggest gas reserves and the government is keen to development the industry, as it views it as a potential game changer for the country’s economy”* the report said. It would develop profits for the energy sector in the short-term but destroy South Africa’s natural resources located in the Karoo. According to Bernama, a news agency based in Malaysia reported that the

South African government will conduct research in respect to the economic and social impacts of Fracking technology. The report 'South Africa's Eastern Cape Province Launches Study on Impact of Shale Gas Development' stated the following:

The government of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province has set wheels in motion preparing for massive exploration and production of shale gas in the Karoo Basin, which covers some 600,000 square kilometres in central and southern South Africa and contains thick, organic rich shales.

The provincial government has embarked on a 16 million-Rand (US\$1.49 million) research project with the Nelson Mandela University to determine the socio-economic implications of shale gas development in the province.

The Karoo is one of the few major basins in the world where the natural baseline is still intact and the provincial government views the pending extraction of shale gas there as a potential game-changer of the province's economic fortunes.

According to the iafrica.com report it said that *"In late 2013, the government lifted its moratorium on fracking in the Karoo but also imposed new regulations to govern shale gas exploration."* It is an indication that South Africa is on board to move ahead with shale gas fracking technologies since they already implemented regulations Shell Oil Company would have to follow under the South African government. *"I am very excited because of the technologies we can bring to the table. We've got shale gas upstream experience in British Columbia," Sasol chief executive David Constable said in a Fin24 report.* *Sasol wants to tap into the natural gas industry "We want to get involved and participate and monetize that gas in country with gas to liquid, gas to power, gas to chemicals," he said. Constable said that Sasol's experience in British Columbia would enable it to frack the Karoo in "an environmentally friendly fashion."* According to 'e news channel Africa (eNCA), the South African government is looking forward to the new technology as it claims that it will create new jobs creation and cost-efficient energy resources for the public:

Government is excited about major game-changing discoveries of untapped potential for petroleum development, spanning both off-shore and on-shore, including shale gas. We will move ahead decisively, yet responsibly, with the exploration of shale gas," said Shabangu. She said government won't simply brush aside the concerns of activists and communities in the Karoo. "There'll be a public campaign to visit communities who may be affected to explain what will happen," she said. Shabangu said the final regulations for the exploration of shale gas are being finalised and will be published shortly

Maybe the South African government should visit shale gas 'fracking' sites around the world especially in places like Texas or Pennsylvania that is causing major health problems. An online anti-fracking website called www.nyagainstfracking.org quoted Dr. Sheila Bushkin, MD, MPH of the Institute for Health and the Environment at University at Albany on what the impact of shale gas fracking:

These stories from Pennsylvania are very alarming," she said. "The perspective of the gas industry fails to show adequate concern for the long-term health and quality of life of people. When you listen to the personal experiences of actual residents of Pennsylvania and other states where fracking has gone forward,

you will hear stories of dead cows, pets, sick children, poisoned water and other serious health and environmental problems. These stories confirm our need for much greater research and evidence-based scientific facts”

Let’s hope South Africa would reverse its course for the sake of the South African population and its natural resources. According to www.news24.com, *“Multinational Royal Dutch Shell states that fracking in the Karoo for shale gas may not be financially viable”* since it is not confirmed how much natural gas is actually available in the Karoo. Shell Oil Company knows that fracking is not environmentally safe for the health of the community it directly affects, but profits over human life do take precedence in this situation.

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