

EU urged to take 'pragmatic' approach to unconventional gas extraction



By Brian Johnson - 25th March 2013

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The shale gas "revolution" should be embraced as an opportunity rather than a threat, an event in parliament has heard.

Polish MEP Boguslaw Sonik, speaking at the event last week, organised by the Parliament Magazine in association with DMT and TÜV Nord, said that a more scientific debate on the issue was crucial in ensuring that Europe did not lose out on the potential economic benefits of unconventional gas exploitation.

Sonik, who hosted the event, which focused on how policymakers could combine energy security and environmental safety within the unconventional gas debate, argued that misconceptions surrounding the health and environmental impact of unconventional gas extraction had primarily driven the European debate on the issue, rather than sound scientific evidence.

The Polish deputy's own initiative report on the potential negative impact of shale gas extraction - which was passed by a large majority of MEPs last November - emphasised that the extraction of unconventional gasses, such as shale gas, tight gas and coal bed methane, was environmentally safe and posed no health risks as long as strong environmental and safety standards were adhered to.

"It's important," he added, "that MEPs lead the debate on issues such as energy and environmental safety. Our citizens have the right and expect that the European parliament will look carefully at this issue and take action to create legislation if required."

Shale gas revolution

"But we must take into consideration what is happening across global energy markets, the US shale gas revolution must be taken into account," said Sonik.

The US now produces around 15 per cent of its natural gas supplies from unconventional sources, which has helped dramatically reduce domestic energy prices. Predictions suggest that production could be as high as 50 per cent by 2030.

However, the issue at the heart of the fierce debate over the safety of unconventional gas is the controversial extraction process of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

Fracking involves drilling into gas filled rock formations then fracturing them with a high pressure mix of water, sand and chemicals to release the trapped gases.

Opponents of fracking argue that it can cause minor earthquakes and contaminate underground water supplies. However, supporters counter that the process is safe, has been used for decades, and that because fracking is undertaken several thousand metres below water tables, there is little risk of gas leakage related contamination.

Myths and realities

Greek MEP Niki Tzavela, who also drafted an own initiative report on the industrial aspects of shale gas alongside that of Sonik last November, acknowledged during a speech to those attending the event that there was a need to distinguish the "realities from the myths" over unconventional gas exploitation.

"I want to be clear," she said. "Unconventional sources are not necessarily the panacea to all our energy problems. But somewhere along the line, we have to become more objective about how we examine the debate on unconventional gas in Europe."

"Up until now, that debate has not been based on scientific data and market analysis of the benefits that unconventional gas can have on industry and competitiveness."

"The debate has been about whether 'Gaslands' [A 2010 documentary on the alleged environmental and health impact of unconventional gas drilling and extraction on rural communities in the US] is real or not. So number one, we have to separate the realities from the myths."

Tzavela acknowledged that the extractive industries had not helped their case in the early rush to explore and drill "without cleaning up the mess they left".

"However, I believe that since the two reports on unconventional sources were adopted by the European parliament last November, industries and companies have taken good note of this and have reacted positively."

"We have to be more pragmatic about the approach we take on energy policy. Promoting the deployment of more renewables and energy efficiency is all well and good. I fully support this."

"But we don't have to be dogmatic. Just because we support renewables and energy efficiency measures doesn't mean that we have to exclude everything else. This would be completely unrealistic."

A golden age for gas?

Attendees also heard from Ralph Schlüter, deputy head of geology and borehole survey at engineering group DMT, who opened his presentation with an amended Time magazine cover image of a piece of shale rock with the headline, 'This rock could power Europe'.

While outlining the technical processes involved in fracking, Schlüter posed the question of whether additional rules on unconventional gas extraction were needed to enable a "golden age of gas" to develop in Europe.

"If there is no public acceptance then Europe will never get to a position of industrial production of unconventional gas."

Andrea Strachinescu, head of unit for new energy technologies in the European commission's energy directorate, argued that both energy security and environmental safety were equally important, saying that there can be no trade-off between the two.

Strachinescu said that the shale gas revolution in the US had led to a switch from coal to gas with a corresponding reduction in CO2 remissions, but at the moment "it was difficult to actually assess if we have similar shale gas [potential] in Europe".

She told participants that the commission was currently running a public consultation on shale gas. "But before any decisions will be taken, everything will have to be properly analysed. Shale gas could be an important part of the EU's energy mix, but it must benefit citizens; there can be no trade-off.

A reasonable level of risk?

However, Antoine Simon from Friends of the Earth Europe questioned the overarching theme

of the event, arguing that it "implicitly asks participants and decision makers to find a compromise between energy security and environmental safety".

Simon said that the impact of unconventional gas extraction was constantly downplayed by its proponents, yet questioned why then were environmental safety measures being debated so much if the extraction process was - as alleged - already safe and well-regulated.

"The extreme techniques used to access and extract unconventional gas reserves generate cumulative impacts at both local and global levels, on climate and on people's health and environment that can hardly be properly regulated and are far beyond what can be considered as a reasonable level of risk."

Simon said industry arguments that fracking technology was nothing new were misleading as modern hydraulic fracturing techniques were very different to processes used over the years to stimulate access to conventional gas reserves.

"The new technology has been developed to access a much more difficult kind of geology. The new type of drilling requires the use of many new chemicals, much more water, pumped at much higher pressure and therefore with much higher impacts, whether inherent or accidental, for surface and ground habitats."

One per cent myth?

Simon also criticised what he called the "one per cent myth" regarding the use of chemicals in the fracking process.

Proponents argue that chemicals represent only one per cent of fracking fluids. However one per cent of a 20 million litre fluid represents several tonnes of chemicals for each fracking operation.

MEP comment

Pro unconventional gas deputies, Konrad Szymanski and Roger Helmer were quick to respond to Simon's comments, with the Polish ECR MEP making a passionate plea to learn from the mistakes of the US and move to develop unconventional gas activities.

"I agree that there can be no trade-off on environmental safety concerns. I don't know anyone in this parliament that doesn't want to follow strict environmental legislation. However, we have the chance to learn something and to avoid the mistakes made in North America", said Szymanski.

British MEP Helmer argued that most of the objections used against developing Europe's unconventional gas resources could be used for any type of energy-related drilling operations.

"Those risks are there to be managed and regulated. Unconventional gas is a gift from heaven for Europe. It would be wholly irresponsible if we just turned our backs on it," said Helmer.

Closing the debate, Guido Rettig, CEO of technology service provider TÜV Nord, said that it was clear that there could be a "very important economic impact if Europe could deliver unconventional gas", and that the EU needed to show the way.

Rettig said that any uptake on developing unconventional gas resources "depends on our innovation and our capability to reduce energy imports while enhancing production".

However, on energy policy, it's up to EU member states to decide, but the ball is now in the European commission's court."