

As England fracks, Wales looks forward to a frack-free future

The Welsh Government now has responsibility for licensing onshore petroleum extraction in Wales. Bleddyn Lake, Campaigns and Development Manager at Friends of the Earth Cymru explains how Wales is looking forward to a frack-free future.

In September, Simon Roscoe Blevins, Richard Roberts, and Rich Loizou were jailed for trying to stop fracking at Preston New Road near Blackpool. They were convicted of causing a public nuisance after clambering onto lorries carrying drilling equipment to energy firm Cuadrilla's base in Lancashire, last year. Blevins, Roberts and Loizou are the first environmental activists imprisoned in the UK since the mass public trespass of Kinder Scout in the Peak District in 1932, marking the beginning of the right-to-roam movement. During a seven-day court hearing the protestors weren't able to voice their concerns about fracking or explain that many people in the community welcomed their actions.

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So what is fracking? Why are people like Blevins, Roberts and Loizou willing to risk jail to stop it? Fracking is a way of extracting gas or oil trapped inside rocks. To get the gas or oil out, the rock has to be fractured, known as 'hydraulic



fracturing' or fracking for short. A mixture of water, sand and chemicals is pumped down the well at very high pressure, fracturing the rock. When the pressure is released, the gas or oil flows back up the well.

Fracking is controversial for many reasons. People are worried about groundwater contamination from the chemicals used in the fracking process, air pollution, localised earthquakes, well integrity and

methane leakage, and the industrialisation of our landscape. There are also concerns about the effect of fracking on public health, house prices and, most crucially, on climate change.

It looks like we're finally waving goodbye to any prospect of fracking in Wales.

The Paris Agreement of 2015 clearly stated that global temperature should increase by no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (from pre-industrial levels) if we are to stop dangerous runaway climate change. Starting up a new fossil fuel industry in the UK is a massive retrograde step, making it even harder for us to meet our climate change targets and commitments.

When Friends of the Earth Cymru first began campaigning against fracking, there wasn't any great political will to stop it. Gradually we were able to explain the risks, lobby politicians, highlight what was happening in other countries and present alternative (and better) solutions.

In February 2015 the Welsh Government announced a moratorium on fracking in Wales using existing planning regulations. A year later this moratorium was extended to include Underground Coal Gasification (a particularly nasty process involving the production of syngas by 'controlled' underground combustion which even the UK Government doesn't support).

The moratorium was a great step forward but it wasn't an actual ban. When details of the Wales Act 2017 came out, it became clear that once this new legislation was in place, the necessary powers over onshore petroleum licencing would become devolved to Wales.

We engaged a prominent QC and

Barrister to draw up expert legal opinion on how Wales could use the new powers conferred under the Wales Act, to effectively ban fracking in Wales. This recommended beefing up Welsh planning regulations, using the new devolved powers to enact new legislation and to amend the Infrastructure Act 2015.

Earlier this year, the Welsh Government issued a consultation on Planning Policy Wales and we are currently awaiting the outcome. We anticipate stronger planning regulations on fracking and other similar technologies, which is particularly important in relation to Underground Coal Gasification as this remains a non-devolved extraction technology but is covered under Welsh Planning Regulations.

The Welsh Government have also consulted on Petroleum Extraction Policy in Wales prior to the newly devolved powers starting this October. This consultation, which we've been working hard towards for many years, hopefully marks the end of any prospect of fracking, Coal Bed Methane (another extraction process which involves drilling into coal beds and pumping out water thereby depressurising the seams allowing gas to flow out), and Underground Coal Gasification in Wales.

In this consultation, the Welsh Government has stated that their proposed future policy for petroleum extraction in Wales would be:

"We will not undertake any new petroleum licensing in Wales, or support applications for hydraulic fracturing petroleum licence consents."

Friends of the Earth Cymru have supported this policy position and are calling for Coal Bed Methane and Underground Coal Gasification to be similarly covered by either this policy or under Planning Policy Wales. We would also like to see the Welsh Government amend section 43 the Infrastructure Act 2015 so that it does not apply to the Welsh onshore area and thereby reverts to the pre-2015 position whereby operators are required to secure the

permission of landowners before drilling under their land for the purposes of fracking and/or Coal Bed Methane. A situation which was changed by the UK Government in order to make it easier for fracking companies to frack areas despite local opposition.

Whilst supporting the Welsh Government's ambitions and policies on fracking, we must now move forward urgently in the fight on climate change. We need stronger decarbonisation targets in Wales, including 100 per cent reduction in emissions by 2050 rather than the current 80 per cent.

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Local authorities must also play their part. Recently we discovered that Welsh local authority pension funds invest hundreds of millions of pounds in fossil fuel companies and in other companies that support fracking in other parts of the world. This has to stop. It is time to divest. The Governor of the Bank of England has warned that investments in fossil fuel companies will be at financial risk going forwards, given the need to act on climate change and increasing legislation around the world, making these investments a financial risk as well as a morally dubious one.

The time to act on climate change is now. All of us need to take action and demand the strongest possible action from our leaders. 2018 is the hundredth anniversary of women in Britain getting the (partial) vote. This should be an inspiration to us all to tackle the issues of our age with the same dedication, commitment and bravery. As we reach the end of 2018, it looks like we're finally waving goodbye to any prospect of fracking in Wales.