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How Fracking Affects Your Farmer's Market



As we become more careful about what we put into our bodies, options and opportunities to be more health conscious abound: organic, non-GMO, gluten free...the list goes on. Will we soon be adding frack-free to this growing list? And even if we wanted to, would we have enough information to be able to?

As a quick reminder, fracking is a drilling technique that involves the fracturing of rock through the use of high-pressure, chemical-laced water that is pumped deep underground, releasing natural gas and oil that has been trapped in the rock for millennia. Some of the "treated" water stays underground, and some of it flows back and then needs to be "stored" or "cleaned." Currently there is no safe way to put this wastewater back into the water cycle.

And it's posing a highly underreported threat to our food supply and security and to our families' health.

Where I live in the Northeast, local produce and meat from the neighboring state of Pennsylvania is a common sight, not only at our local farmers' market but also in our local grocery stores. But a disturbing fact recently presented to me by a dear friend has given me pause about some of these local foods. In hushed conversation, my friend told me she no longer buys food from certain counties in Pennsylvania where she knows fracking is in full swing. She also told me that many of her friends and colleagues in the anti-fracking movement, in particular some of her friends with food service businesses, are making similar food choices. Because of anecdotal accounts and a small but growing number of scientific studies, they say, water quality in certain areas, due to fracking and fracking waste (the liquid product that comes back out of the ground after fracking occurs), has been compromised to such an extent that food grown in these areas could be a significant health hazard.

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[NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with PROJECT: PFC's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.]

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As a quick reminder, fracking is a drilling technique that involves the fracturing of rock through the use of high-pressure, chemical-laced water that is pumped deep underground, releasing natural gas and oil that has been trapped in the rock for millennia. Some of the "treated" water stays underground, and some of it flows back and then needs to be "stored" or "cleaned." Currently there is no safe way to put this wastewater back into the water cycle.

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This past fall on the way to an anti-fracking rally in Philadelphia I met an organic farmer who felt the same way. "Kathy" asked me not to use her real name to protect her neighbors who are still farming. With tears in her eyes, Kathy said she and her husband recently sold their organic farm in Pennsylvania, which they had carefully tended for 20 years, two years after a well went in less than a half mile from their farm. Kathy said: "We can't in good conscience say our food is organic, as we no longer are sure about what chemicals are leaching into our soil through our water and through air contamination. The safety of our well water and the chemicals in our air may be doing real damage to our fields." Kathy and her husband had chosen not to sell their land leases, but absentee landowners who own the property next to them made a different decision.

Recent studies by Penn State and Cornell found that in Pennsylvania counties with at least 10,000 dairy cows, those that had at least 150 Marcellus Shale wells experienced a 16 percent average decline in the number of dairy cows between 2007 and 2010, compared with a 3 percent increase in counties without shale gas wells. The counties with the wells saw an 18.5 percent decrease in milk

production; counties without wells experienced an increase in milk production.

At a June 2013 panel discussion on Food, Farms, and Fracking in California, Kassie Siegel, director of the Climate Law Institute at the Center for Biological Diversity, addressed this issue and stated that “fracking pollution poses a real risk to our food sheds, organic farms, and all aspects of food production.”

As fracking expands into areas that are home to some of the most productive farmland in the world, questions need to be raised regarding the long-term safety for the agricultural industry. According to the Catskill Mountainkeeper, fracking and fracking waste can threaten our food supply in the following ways:

- Soil acidity increases in the vicinity of oil and gas pipelines where flaring occurs, reducing the amount of usable essential nutrients in the soil such as carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus. Fracking also releases toxic heavy metals like arsenic, barium, cadmium, chromium, lead, and mercury into soils. Humans and animals that eat these plants are exposed to these heavy metals, which can accumulate in body tissues and cause serious damage.
- Wastewater from fracking can contain high levels of radioactivity. When wastewater is released into our streams and rivers without adequate radiation treatment, highly radioactive elements like uranium and radium, which had previously been safely trapped thousands of feet below the surface, can then enter the food chain and bioaccumulate in humans, plants, and animals just as heavy metals do.
- Many of the chemicals added to create fracking fluid are also known endocrine disruptors, chemicals that interfere with the body's natural signaling system. Frack fluid, however, is a “proprietary mix,” and we aren't fully knowledgeable about all the chemicals that may be in this fluid.
- Improperly handled fracking fluids can also contaminate surface water. Even a small spill of the highly toxic mixture can have large impacts on the surrounding livestock and wildlife. When meat and produce are grown in toxic conditions, the toxic contamination doesn't stop at the farm field. Contaminated fruits, vegetables, and meats can be shipped all over the country, potentially poisoning people hundreds or thousands of miles away from the frack source. Unfortunately, most foods are not adequately inspected for chemical contamination and residue. Furthermore, since the gas companies are not required to disclose the chemicals within fracking fluid, government regulatory organizations may not even know what to test for.

So how we are fighting back? Several states are now fighting for bans on fracking waste disposal, treatment, transportation, and storage. And caution warnings have not only been issued in the US. In Germany, the Brewers Union is concerned that fracking there could disrupt the water supply to such an extent that the country's Beer Purity Law might be violated. The water purity laws date back to 1516 and are designed to ensure that German beer is kept simple, pure, and free from contamination.

As a parent I carefully read labels and follow guides like those issued by the Environmental Working Group on how to choose foods with low or no chemicals. Knowing the potential risks that may exist to our food because of fracking, how am I supposed to understand, assess, and carefully monitor the potential for hazardous chemicals that may now be in our food chain?

Isn't it in ALL our best interests (health, environmental, and economic) to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the impacts, both immediate and cumulative, from fracking are either benign or potentially serious? In the US, fracking or its by-products already do or have the potential to directly impact citizens of the following states and their air or water supplies: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Louisiana, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Michigan, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wyoming. (And this is before we consider the states that might be importing food products from these states!) We currently have a big supply of gas, and there is no rush to frack.

So, President Obama, contrary to the some of the statements you made about natural gas in your wonderful climate change speech on June 25th, 2013, please don't be in a hurry to expand natural gas production just yet! You need to show me, my family, my friends, and their families that fracking and fracking waste aren't going to negatively impact the foods that our families eat, the water we drink, and the air that we breathe!

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