



Fracking in Michigan?

by Rick Weller, Founder of Organically Done Plant Products

I want to discuss what's currently going on in Michigan relative to hydraulic fracturing or, what is more commonly known as fracking. Why is a guy who owns an organic fertilizer company talking about the oil industry? Well, I do have some past experience in the industry and I believe that there is a significant environmental risk involved in this process. I'll go back to organic growing issues next time.

So, what exactly is fracking? It's a technique to extract oil and gas from areas where conventional drilling methods do not work, primarily in shale rock formations. Fluid is pumped into a well at very high pressure, causing the rock formations to fracture, releasing oil and gas that is then recovered. The process has been in existence since the 1940's but only used outside of traditional oil fields in the past decade. About 80,000 fracking wells have been drilled since 2005 – 22,000 in 2012 alone – every state with shale formations is trying to figure out how to leverage this new found resource.

To date, most of the fracking work has been concentrated in a few states (Texas, Colorado, North Dakota, Pennsylvania) but oil companies are expanding their focus and Michigan is a prime target. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) just held public hearings (week of July 15th) on proposed regulations (http://www7.dleg.state.mi.us/orr/Files/ORR/1298_2013-101EQ_orr-draft.pdf) for hydraulic fracturing in the state.



So, is fracking good? Gas and oil not previously economically recoverable now is. This has led to a surge in U.S. oil and gas production. Many industry analysts predict that U.S. oil companies will soon be exporting natural gas.

- Gas and oil imports are down dramatically
- Natural gas prices are down and this boom has probably kept oil prices in check
- Lots of jobs in the oil industry have been created
- Power companies are switching from coal to natural gas which is a much cleaner burning fuel

So, is fracking bad? The oil industry is expanding fracking production rapidly even though its environmental impact is not yet well understood.

- Millions of gallons of fresh water are used during the fracking process – by some estimates, fracking is now annually using 0.5% of all fresh water consumed. Large quantities of chemicals (drilling companies are typically not required to release their fracking fluid recipe or identity what chemicals are used, saying this is proprietary information) are mixed with the water (creating the fracking fluid) and injected into the well. A portion of the fracking fluid flows back up the pipe with the released oil and gas where it is separated. This hazardous waste is usually injected back into deep disposal wells or stored in open pits
- There is significant concern that the process may contaminate our fresh drinking water – fracking fluid, oil, gas or other elements released by the fracking process escapes the pipeline and finds its way to our drinking water
- Large volumes of greenhouse gases (including methane which is particularly harmful) escape during fracking operations
- Instances of earthquake activity have been recorded in high-volume fracking areas that have had little, if any, historical activity – pretty scary to think that a human process can trigger an earthquake
- The oil industry is using eminent domain (taking private land for public use) in cases to seize private property for new gas pipelines and access roads
- Many experts believe that a fracking well's lifetime is brief (a couple of years) versus conventional wells that produce for decades – many fracking companies have gone bankrupt, leaving clean-up costs to the taxpayer

One of the most concerning issues to me is the huge expansion of this industry with significant support of state and federal government agencies while so many significant environmental and economic questions remain. Why don't we slow down a bit until we have some answers? Because there is lots and lots and lots of money involved.



Tons of information on the subject of fracking is available on the web. An award-winning documentary called Gasland is available on Netflix (I highly recommend it). Unfortunately, almost everything I have read or seen takes a very slanted view, either for or against.

My opinion? Fracking provides short term positives that will lead to many long term negatives – it gives us another chance to kick the bucket down the road and let future generations try to clean up our mess. I'm all for jobs, economic security, cheap electricity, etc. but at some point we have to pay for the environmental destruction.

So, don't sit on the sidelines... do your own research and decide where you sit. Get involved if you care about the issue. Call your state representative, submit your comments to the Michigan DEQ, make some noise.

Organically Done (www.organicallydone.com) is a Michigan manufacturer of organic fertilizers and soil amendments. Our mission is to produce high-quality truly organic products that provide everything your plants need while being free of potential contaminating sources that are found in many of today's "organic" alternatives – NOT ALL ORGANICS ARE CREATED EQUAL.