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Fracking and Flaring: Haste Makes Waste

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Posted: Friday, January 3, 2014 9:44 am

By Miranda C. Spencer, Shalereporter.com | 2 comments

For real perspective on fracking for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale, we need to consider what's happening in the oil fields of the Great Plains. And in Russia and Nigeria.

Fracking, with all its controversies and disruptions, continues apace because natural gas is supposedly precious. Yet in the Bakken Shale, the gas that escapes during oil extraction is being treated as an afterthought. Where there's no practical and economical ways to contain, store, or transport this resource, it is simply burned off, or flared.

How much? So much the glow can be seen from space. According to the [U.S. Energy Information Agency](#), in 2012 North Dakota flared some 80 billion cubic feet (bcf) of natural gas -- 50 percent more flaring than in 2011 and about 800 percent more than in 2007.

According to the American Gas Association, 1 bcf of natural gas is "enough to meet the needs of approximately 10,000 - 11,000 American homes for one year." Meaning North Dakota's wasted gas could power nearly a million homes.

Meanwhile, America's largest producing shale-gas play, [the Marcellus, is producing 12 bcf of gas a day](#). So, nearly a week's worth of Marcellus gas was squandered in the Bakken last year. That's an insult to both the workers in the gas fields and the communities getting "fracked up" by the shale boom.

Globally, it looks even worse: More than 5.3 trillion cf of natural gas is flared, according to the World Bank. And the U.S. is No. 5 in the world's Flaring Olympics (our former nemesis, Russia, is No. 1). Ironically, America is also the world's largest market for natural gas--by flaring, we're dumping a product we could sell in our own backyards.

So why are we working so frantically to get gas out of the ground in one part of the country, while discarding it in another?

Short-sighted economics: In North Dakota, the limited gas-processing infrastructure there can't keep up with fracking frenzy, and the market price of oil is so much higher than gas's that the latter isn't "worth" keeping. (If oil is considered the steak here, natural gas is the offal-- only instead of being made into dog food, it's left on the slaughterhouse floor.) In addition, adding more gas to the market could push today's low prices even lower.

Thus, instead of being used to cook dinner, North Dakota's flared gas is cooking the planet, pumping some 4.5 million extra tons of climate-heating carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in 2012, according to the World Bank. Globally, flaring releases a

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Miranda C. Spencer, a researcher with the online news sites Environmental Health News and The Daily Climate, is a freelance journalist and media critic based in the New York metro area. Her writing over the past 25 years, including eight magazine cover stories, has appeared in The Daily Climate, Extra! (the journal of FAIR), E magazine, American Forests, and many other publications. Miranda's investigative work has been honored by Project Censored. Her website is [Red Panda Communications](#).



Suzie Gilbert is a writer, a state and federally licensed wild bird rehabilitator, and the founder of Flyaway, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of injured and orphaned wild birds. She has written an award-winning environmental column for Taconic News Media, and has published the children's book "Hawk Hill" (Chronicle Books, 1996), and her memoir "Flyaway" (HarperCollins, 2009.) Her articles and opinion pieces have appeared in various newspapers, including the Washington Post. She blogs for "The Crooked Wing" and "10,000

total of 400 million tons of CO2. That's an astounding amount of wasted gas.

Flaring is also a waste of money: In 2012, [a group of 37 investors with \\$500 billion in assets wrote](#) to 21 of the energy industry's largest players, warning them to cut flaring. They complained that the "natural gas flared each day in North Dakota [in 2011] represents approximately \$110 million in lost revenue."

No doubt realizing this, North Dakota's governor announced last fall that an [80-mile-long natural gas pipeline](#) will be laid in the Bakken—although with production of 1 billion cf per day and capacity of only 126 million cf per day, will it be able to keep up?

The practice of flaring is a form of systemic denial. One writer even called it a "[crime against humanity](#)". Fossil fuels are finite, and there is no room in the atmosphere for extra greenhouse gases. We can't afford to let gas go up in smoke.

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Miranda Spencer

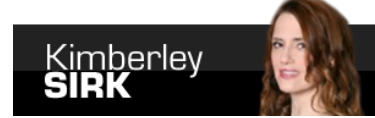


Yes, indeed, it is quite hellish. When I first saw flaring in person (in North Dakota) I

Birds" and has been profiled in both the New York Times and on Andrew C. Revkin's New York Times blog, Dot Earth.



Tara's academic work and pursuits are focused on eco-feminism and ethics. Tara has been featured on AOL's Patch.com as a weekly columnist, Moxie Momma, exploring social concerns and parenting strategies. Writing articles on lifestyle, entertainment and local travel, Tara has been a regular contributor to the Bethlehem, Hellertown and Upper Saucon Patch. As a research and investigative journalist, Tara's work is regularly featured in the Elucidator Magazine. A specialist in the technical fields of psychology, philosophy and theology, Tara also teaches classes on Ethics and Moral Dilemmas, Death and Dying, World Religions, and Introduction to Philosophy.



Kimberley Sirk is in communications in the healthcare industry. She is also the features editor for Drug Discovery News, which reports on issues, trends and product development in the pharmaceutical industry. She has more than 15 years of experience in a broad range of professional positions, including newspaper journalism, university public relations and county government management.



couldn't believe it was legal, nor that it was basically unattended -- such a fire hazard.

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Miranda Spencer



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Victoria Switzer posted at 6:10 pm on Fri, Jan 3, 2014.



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sorry Calvin, I did not proofread.."Once you know, you cannot know." I really need a proofreader.

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Victoria Switzer posted at 6:07 pm on Fri, Jan 3, 2014.



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The first time I witnessed flaring I thought it was Armageddon. I awoke from a sound sleep to see the walls flickering. I was certain something horrible had happened! My ever alert German Shepherd, Bruin, was all ears and eyes at the windows. The cats were perched on the sill staring out. The sky was on fire and I thought we were in hell. We were. I called the neighbors, who have since moved to Florida, and was told it was "normal". "Normal" I repeated. I hung up and watched with my Bruin for awhile. I swear there was something demonic about the trees swaying with the howling and the flames in the sky. The next day the neighbor's husband said something like, "Oh yeah, they burn off enough gas to heat Pennsylvania for a year!" I felt myself spiral down into barbaric world-Mad Max. Surely, DEP, elected officials, citizens, would all protest this abuse of God's bounty! I am no longer that person. I now know..and once you know? Tell it to me Calvin.."you cannot know". Happy New Year.

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