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Fracking surrounded by misinformation

By Alex Ritchie

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — By now most New Mexicans have heard at least something about “fracking,” the process of injecting water, sand and chemicals into an oil or gas well at high pressures to create or widen fractures in formations deep underground.

Fracking also is the focus of the new movie “Promised Land,” starring and produced by well-known movie and television stars, Matt Damon and John Krasinski. While a work of fiction, “Promised Land” holds the potential to misinform the public and encourage unwise and unwarranted county and city regulations.

In “Promised Land,” Damon plays Steve Butler, the pitchman for a natural gas company that desires to drill new wells in a small farming town, and Krasinski plays environmental activist Dustin Noble, who comes to town to stop Butler and convince the town to vote down fracking in their community.

Contrary to the bulk of evidence, “Promised Land” suggests in disturbing scenes that fracking is highly dangerous for local communities. In the film, a retired MIT-educated engineer-turned-high-school science teacher urges town residents to vote against fracking because it pollutes groundwater and scorches farmland, leaving dead cows in its wake. In another scene, environmental activist Noble illustrates fracking to a class of young schoolchildren by punching holes in a plastic bag containing household chemicals, spilling the chemicals over a cardboard farm and then setting the farm on fire.

In reality, a fracked oil or gas well includes several layers of steel pipe and cement, with the fracking itself confined to formations that are hundreds or thousands of feet below any shallow freshwater aquifers. The Environmental Protection Agency has attempted to connect fracking to groundwater pollution with little success. EPA’s most recent findings relating to Pavillion, Wyo., conflicted sharply with findings of the U.S. Geological Survey that were conducted alongside the related EPA tests. Many in industry argue that fracking has never been credibly tied to groundwater contamination.

As to air pollution, extensive EPA regulations just became effective in October to control emissions from oil and gas operations, including during the completion of hydraulically fractured wells.

This is not to say that fracking is without any risks at all, but the attendant risks are controlled and minimized by both existing regulations and technological advances in drilling.

The viewing public may not be aware that the film is little more than sensationalist fiction, the implication of which is that oil and gas companies are evil and that fracking kills people. Indeed, as several of the scenes in “Promised Land” played out, I could hear the gasps around the theater.

As I exited the theater, a moviegoer said out loud to a man who seemed to be her spouse, “I can’t believe they can just kill people to get natural gas.”

Such impressions are dangerous in the sense that they can infect policymaking related to fracking in particular and oil and gas in general, an industry that contributed \$2.4 billion in New Mexico state and local revenues in 2011 alone.

By combining fracking with horizontal drilling technologies, the oil and gas industry is poised to propel the U.S. to a net exporter of natural gas and, according to recent estimates of the International Energy Agency, the world’s largest producer of oil by 2020.

As reported in the Journal, state legislators have advanced an amendment to the state Constitution passed by voters in 1986 prohibiting local governments from passing gun bans in order to avoid a hodgepodge of local laws passed in an “emotional state.” State legislators should consider similar action to make clear that the New Mexico Oil and Gas Act preempts local regulation, or be prepared for future legal battles and the potential impact on all New Mexicans of decreased oil and gas revenues and related impacts on education and essential services.

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