

POLITICO

Greens sour on natural gas

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Whatever happened to the romance between the environmental lobby and natural gas?

After years of basking in a green glow as the cleanest fossil fuel and a favorite short-term choice to replace cheap-but-dirty coal, gas now finds itself under attack from environmentalists, filmmakers and congressional Democrats — and even from some scientists who raise doubts about whether its total emissions are as climate-friendly as commonly believed.

Case in point: the Sierra Club, whose former executive director, Carl Pope, has spoken warmly in recent years about gas as an alternative to coal in power plants. Now, the group is considering calling for natural gas to be phased out by 2050 — about 20 years after it wants coal eliminated.

While the group said it hasn't changed its mind about gas vs. coal, Deputy Executive Director Bruce Hamilton says he and other Sierra Club leaders are "trying to be clearer in our communication. ... We want people to know that natural gas is not a clean fuel and it needs to be cleaned up before it can be an acceptable fuel."

The assault comes at a time when gas's fortunes appear to be soaring — blessed by low prices, abundant domestic supplies, quantum leaps in extraction technology and a starring role in the "clean energy" agendas of President Barack Obama and leaders on Capitol Hill.

Some energy analysts believe that natural gas is poised to become the leading fuel for U.S. electric utilities in the next few decades, dethroning King Coal. In large part, that's because gas's cleaner-burning nature could potentially dovetail with efforts to reduce carbon emissions.

Gas advocates say they're confident that once the facts are in, clean energy backers will appreciate the fuel's advantages.

"We share the view of many environmental organizations that natural gas can improve air quality, aid the development of renewables and advance clean energy for our nation," said Daniel Whitten, spokesman for the industry group America's Natural Gas Alliance.

But there's no mistaking that gas's green cred is under fire. That's partly because of the controversy about the extraction technique called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, which has prompted a partial moratorium on the practice in New York and accusations that it has contaminated rivers, streams and groundwater.

"Five, six years ago, people would say, 'Natural gas, clean but not cheap,'" said Thomas Gibson, president and CEO of the American Iron and Steel Institute. "Now some people want to say, 'Natural gas may be cheap, but it's not clean.' Is that where we're heading?"

That would be a bad outcome, from my perspective.”

Saya Kitasei of the Worldwatch Institute, who has written about fracking, said the debate may be a bigger problem than the pollution issue itself, which she sees as solvable.

“The tone of the dialogue has become such that I don’t think it’s productive for either side,” she said.

It wasn’t long ago that both sides appeared to be forming a gas-green alliance, at least in the fight against coal. In 2009, for example, environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. wrote in The Huffington Post that “the giant advantage of a quick conversion from coal to gas is the quickest route for jump-starting our economy and saving our planet.”

While gas has “its own set of environmental caveats,” he wrote, “those impacts are dwarfed by the disastrous holocaust of coal and can be mitigated by careful regulation.”

Later that year, the Sierra Club’s Pope took his share of criticism after The Wall Street Journal reported that he was accompanying Aubrey McClendon, CEO of Oklahoma-based Chesapeake Energy Corp., on trips promoting the merits of gas over coal.

Pope, now the Sierra Club’s chairman, also praised an ambitious energy plan by billionaire T. Boone Pickens that would convert much of the nation’s heavy-vehicle fleet to burning natural gas while expanding the use of wind power for electricity.

Asked if he could count on the Sierra Club as an ally now, Pickens responded, “The Sierra Club has many factions.” But he said he hopes he could still enlist a lot of members’ support.

“I think if I had time to talk to them, or they had time to listen to me, that I could convince them that the Pickens plan makes sense,” he told POLITICO. “I have no fear of the Sierra Club.”

Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune said his group supports “at least half” the Pickens plan — the wind half — and sees “some merit” to his other arguments. On the other hand, Brune said, Pickens’s “preference for gas is a little too unqualified for our tastes. ... You can’t separate the uses of gas from how gas is produced.”

Energy policy leaders at some of the big eco-groups say they’re still convinced that gas can yield benefits for the climate, as long as concerns such as fracking and methane leakage can be addressed.

“There are measures to be taken to drill for and collect and ship natural gas as cleanly as possible,” said David Doniger, policy director of the Natural Resources Defense Council’s climate center. And if that happens, “there is an opportunity to reduce carbon emissions through the use of natural gas instead of coal.”

But some greens are taking a stern tone.

“Simply because coal is awful doesn’t mean natural gas gets to be terrible,” said Mark Brownstein of the Environmental Defense Fund’s energy program.

“We think they can do it better,” he said of the gas companies. “And if they did do it better, they would have something constructive to contribute to our transition to a cleaner, lower-carbon economy.”

Industry groups say they’re doing just that. The American Petroleum Institute recently issued its third set of “guidance documents” outlining environmentally sound practices for fracking and says it regularly shares its findings with state regulators. But the industry’s critics are pushing for federal regulation and disclosure of all chemicals injected underground.

Meanwhile, the industry has spent a lot of time lately on the defensive.

ANGA and other industry groups have launched a campaign to debunk “Gasland,” the Oscar-nominated documentary that equates fracking with flaming faucets (inaccurately, the group maintains). Another industry group, Energy in Depth, issued a scathing rebuttal in January to a ProPublica story questioning gas’s climate advantages over coal, accusing the nonprofit news website of making a “Rube Goldberg analysis.” The industry also faced accusations last month from House Democrats that oil and gas companies have been injecting millions of gallons of diesel fuel underground without permits as part of the fracking process.

The industry defends its safety record, saying many of the accusations — especially in “Gasland” — are based on distorted or fabricated evidence. “It is frustrating when the debate moves away from fact,” ANGA’s Whitten said.

Still, energy markets expert William O’Grady said the furor threatens to derail what could be a time of promise for the fuel.

“If I’m the CEO of a power company, and I’m having this Chesapeake guy or Boone Pickens telling me that we have more natural gas than we know what to do with, my retort is, ‘Tell me what environmental regulations on fracking are going to look like five years from now,’” said O’Grady of Confluence Investment Management in St. Louis.

“Honestly, unless you get regulations that severely curtail the use of fracking, I think we’ve got an immense amount of natural gas,” O’Grady added. “But in my mind, that is a monumental ‘if.’”

Of course, the GOP-dominated House is working to dismantle environmental regulations, not add to them. But state and local governments can also throw up roadblocks to gas extraction, and traditional tree-huggers are far from the only people outraged by gas drilling these days, Brownstein said.

“These are hunters in Pennsylvania,” he said. “These are landowners in New York state. These are homeowners in the suburbs of Dallas. ... And they’re mad about it.”

Reid Detchon, executive director of the Energy Future Coalition, agreed that the environmental friction threatens to undermine gas’s future unless it’s addressed, perhaps through regulations.

“I don’t think the industry is seeing the long-term advantage to them to be seen as the clean fossil fuel,” Detchon said. “If they are seen as yet another polluting extractive industry, the public support for gas will not be maintained.”

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