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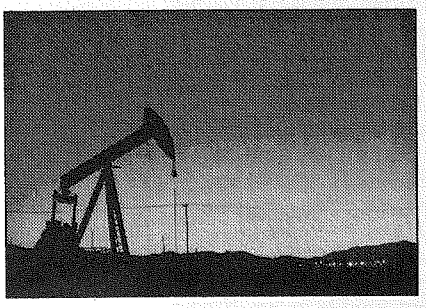
Our Views

Fracking fizzle

After lots of rule-making and fussing, fracking may not be a big deal in North Carolina.

Gov. Pat McCrory and his fellow Republicans in the General Assembly once spoke of fracking, the extraction of gas through high-pressure injection of chemically laced water into rock, as a potential economic boom for the state. Once North Carolina opened the way to fracking, they said, jobs would be created that would help the state prosper.

Now,those in the industry that pushes fracking have become reluctant suitors when it comes to North Carolina. They've flirted with lawmakers, who formed a group to set rules for fracking that ended up as agreeable to the industry as they were objectionable to environmentalists.



But the suitors don't appear ready to walk the aisle.

It seems that shale gas exploration or drilling requires expensive geologic testing that would cost the companies millions of dollars. And there's no way around that, no matter how breathless politicians may be about the benefits of fracking.

North Carolina has another problem – or perhaps that should be called a blessing – when it comes to fracking. The state's shale deposits just don't appear to be that large. So energy companies are hesitant to invest all those millions for the potential of a fairly small return.

Then there's the matter of global energy prices, which are falling.

The fracking debate has stretched on for years, and Republicans will have only themselves to blame if it turns out it was all a lot of sound and fury.

Environmentalists who warned that fracking in other states had resulted in problems with water pollution were roundly dismissed by the fracking advocates, who fell into a trap they set for themselves. They touted the benefits of fracking without entertaining the idea that maybe North Carolina wasn't an ideal place to do it.

The pro-fracking lawmakers alarmed a lot of people, particularly those in Lee, Moore and Chatham counties, the most likely spots for exploration. And, of course, they took their usual posture of siding with industry when the time came to make all the rules.

Now the attempts to turn a corner of North Carolina into North Dakota may be for naught.

James Womack of the state's Mining and Energy Commission has been the contact person for companies with an interest in fracking. He recently said, "The conditions don't seem too favorable at this point for energy companies to break into North Carolina."

Even some Republicans in the legislature seem to be backing away, with Rep. Mike Hager of Rutherford County, designated as House majority whip, saying, "It's not a great sea change for North Carolina in the fact that the amount of gas we have is probably on the smaller scale."