

Analysis: The Natural Gas Question

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By John Solomon – **Energy Guardian** It's abundant, clean-burning and presently a whole lot cheaper than oil. But for some reason natural gas hasn't caught on yet as a major player in the great debate over U.S. energy policy.

Many oil companies are currently making a bet that will soon change, laying down big bucks to free natural gas trapped in shale in places like New York, Pennsylvania and North Dakota.

With massive new drilling under way, environmentalists and their allies in Congress are staging their own roadblock increasingly raising concerns about the chemicals used in the process of hydraulic fracturing to free gas from the shale.

Their latest one-two punch came this weekend when The New York Times ran a front-page expose disclosing that federal regulators have long been aware that wastewater from fracking has been discharged into waterways laced with benzene, radium and other dangerous pollutants.

Democrats in Congress led by Rep. Ed Markey of Massachusetts immediately pounced on the revelations, sending a letter accusing the Environmental Protection Agency of taking a "hear no evil, see no evil" approach to regulation by ignoring the discharges from fracking.

The pollution question is a legitimate concern. The industry says current safeguards and regulations are enough to protect residents, but communities near massive drilling sites are increasingly raising alarm about the dangers to their drinking water.

While the oil industry's allies in the Republican Congress are unlikely to take action, expect the questions about pollution to be addressed inside EPA and by the courts in coming months.

Even if new safeguards are put in place, natural gas faces other hurdles in the push to make it a prevalent alternative to oil. T. Boone

Pickens, the oilman turned natural gas advocate, was able to get Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid behind his idea to convert heavy fleet trucks to natural gas but the legislation sputtered last session.

The reason? Many lawmakers are concerned by the pricetag in tight budget times and wonder aloud how hard it will be to get enough gas stations to offer natural gas to create a national network that would make the whole concept work.

President Barack Obama made a major concession recently by adding natural gas to the eligible energy sources to meet his clean energy standard. And that means the natural gas question is here to stay, leaving lawmakers, regulators and the courts to sort out the issues keeping natural gas from becoming a bridge to a clean energy future.