

GONE GLOBAL



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Picture this: I am going through the customs line at the Melbourne airport in Australia, jet lagging after enduring a 14-hour-plus flight from the U.S. West Coast. The agent behind the counter looks at my passport and other documents and notes that I said “writer” is my occupation. “What do you write about?” he very pleasantly asks. “The oil and gas industry,” I reply.

First thing out of his mouth—first thing!—is this: “So, is that fracking thing really ruining all the drinking water?”

Wow. The public misinformation and scare tactics have gone global.

The full truth is still not permeating the public consciousness as it should, even though we do see more and more instances where media outlets have been reporting the U.S. surge in oil and gas production, the jobs being created by the shale gale, and the various economic benefits accruing to the states and to the federal treasury. The general media is not doing a good job of debunking this myth about drinking water.

A perhaps unlikely source from California has taken up the industry’s side of the issue and promotes understanding of natural gas and fracking. In a report titled “Why every serious environmentalist should favor fracking,” the author says that environmentalists who oppose the technology are making a serious mistake, indeed, “a tragic mistake,” in his words.

The speaker is Richard A. Muller, a physics professor at the University of California-Berkeley since 1980, and author of eight books, including “Energy for Future Presidents.” He was named in 2012 one of the top 100 Global Thinkers by Foreign Policy magazine. He and his daughter Elizabeth co-founded BEST—the Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature Project, which addresses climate change. From 2000 to 2005, Elizabeth was an advisor at the Organization for Economic Development.

Bottom line, these are smart, credible people. Nice, too. Publisher Shelley Lamb and I met with them in Houston a few months ago for a fascinating lunch and conversation hosted by Quantum Energy Partners’ business development guru David Bole and by our mutual friend Marlin Downey, a legendary Texas geologist and former president of the AAPG.

The Mullers told us that day that they strongly believe, after many years of analysis of all things energy and climate related, that shale gas provides a solution to pollution—and the greenies need to get with it.

“Shale gas is urgently needed to replace coal and address the greatest human-caused environ-

mental disaster of our time, rising levels of air pollution, which currently are causing 3 million deaths per year worldwide,” they say.

While we frequently hear about greenhouse gas emissions and CO₂ levels being the culprits, the Mullers point out the hidden problem that needs to be made more open—something called PM2.5, which is any particulate matter of a mere 2.5 microns or smaller. These microscopic pollution specks, created by burning fuels such as coal, are so tiny they penetrate to the deepest parts of our lungs. PM2.5 levels are highest in China, where on many days, people have to stay indoors or if they do venture out, wear face masks. PM2.5 levels are higher in Europe than in the U.S.—and yet even in the U.S., according to Environmental Protection Agency estimates, PM2.5 causes 75,000 premature deaths every year.

On a global scale, PM2.5 kills more people each year than AIDS, diabetes or malaria, the Mullers say in their report.

What to do? Muller says conservation to use less fossil fuel, especially less coal—and, use much more natural gas—will go a long way. “The cleanliness of shale gas is intrinsic. Shale gas delivers a 400-fold reduction in PM2.5 compared to coal, and half the CO₂ of coal.

“Natural gas offers a practical and relatively quick way to stem the rise of PM2.5 air pollution. At the same time, as an alternative to coal, it offers an important opportunity to significantly slow the growth of CO₂ emissions,” the Mullers write.

This message should resonate in Australia, and indeed, in every country of the world. One of the biggest challenges, however, is that China still relies too heavily on coal. Even though it is trying to reduce air pollution, its energy needs keeps rising. By 2006 its CO₂ emissions surpassed those of the U.S. and by year-end 2013, they were nearly twice that of the U.S., Muller senior says. What’s more, China adds 50 gigawatts of new coal-fired power per year—the equivalent of enough power for seven New Yorks.

He told us that with proper regulation, any perceived danger of shale-gas drilling and production can be mitigated, such that gas remains the fuel of choice. It can provide enough energy today, while companies work to develop other, more sustainable, noncarbon-based energy sources for the future.

Natural gas from coal seams and deep offshore wells, and soon, from shales, will become Australia’s—and the world’s—go-to fuel for some time to come.