

Climate Summer Riders on the Move for a Frack-Free Massachusetts

Cast of Characters:

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Six college students from North Carolina, Colorado, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, are biking across Western Massachusetts to rally citizens to fight for climate justice and a clean energy future. We have colleagues in teams biking across Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Eastern Massachusetts, each group working to oppose the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure and promote a rapid and responsible transition toward renewable energy. Our team is riding across the Pioneer Valley, raising awareness about the potential for fracking of natural gas and the dangers thereof. Hydraulic Fracturing involves blasting water, mixed with sand and chemicals, at high pressure into the earth. This fractures the shale rock beneath, releasing natural gas, which percolates to the surface, is collected, refined, and shipped to burn for energy.

The problem with fracking has two faces. The first is the process itself, which introduces millions of gallons of contaminated water into the earth, which can leak into underground aquifers and even contaminate major reservoirs. This can render large areas of land reliant on water filtration and/or importation where before they had been self-sufficient. In a world where the climate is changing and water becomes an increasingly precious resource, this sort of model is devastatingly unsustainable.

The other face, of course, is that it represents a continuation of fossil fuel dependence or, as we like to call it, “business as usual.” The public conversation about natural gas has been a very confused and obscured one, and many who would consider themselves environmentally inclined may support natural gas for the simple reason that burning it emits less carbon dioxide than the burning of coal or oil. This makes it an attractive “bridge fuel” that we can burn in our existing infrastructure while we work to make renewable energy more viable. Unfortunately, in a time when we have already reached 400ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, “less bad” is no longer good enough. The International Energy Agency found that if all the fossil fuel infrastructure planned through 2017 comes online, we will be “carbon committed” to exceed the carbon concentration that would tip us over into a 2° C (4-6

degrees Fahrenheit) global temperature rise. These numbers come from the plants' own predictions about the volume of material they will burn over their permitted lifetimes, though many facilities continue to operate beyond this date. Furthermore, methane, which is a major component of natural gas, can leak into the atmosphere unburned, and when it does is at minimum twenty times as potent a greenhouse gas as carbon dioxide. For these reasons, we see an investment in natural gas as a Bridge to Nowhere, a distraction from the work of transition at hand, and a reckless diversion of funds that could otherwise invest in clean energy.

Fortunately, Massachusetts is in a position to lead the nation once again on a matter of great social and political import. Currently in the statehouse is a bill, H788, which would ban the practice of fracking entirely in the state of Massachusetts. Vermont has already issued such a ban, but, since they do not possess frackable shale, the force of this statement is limited. Far more powerful would be the act by Massachusetts of foregoing these short-term gains in favor of long-term economic and environmental security. We are using community art projects, community discussion forums, and letter-writing and phone-calling campaigns to empower the people on the front lines of this struggle to make their voices heard and demand legislative action. Our role on the road is to educate frontline communities about climate change, fracking and natural gas, the work being done to address these, and, most importantly, how they can join in the fight and be part of the solution.