Written evidence submitted by Janet Thorpe (RUT0040)

I am responding to this enquiry because I am extremely concerned about the damaging effect that fracking would have on rural tourism in England, and also in the rest of the UK.

I live in the Forest of Dean, which is an area that is currently threatened by fracking. The Forest is a unique environment where in some places nature has taken over old industrial sites to create beautiful and unusual places not found anywhere else. It is this uniqueness and the proximity to the Wye Valley which attracts tourists from the UK and far beyond. There has been a noticeable increase in the number of tourists from the Far East in recent years.

1 Fracking will result in the irreversible industrialisation of our countryside.

Fracking is a heavily industrialised process unsuitable for the English countryside. The old industries in this area were mainly small in scale and did not require acres of concrete to cover the ground, nor did they use vast quantities of water. Tens of thousands of wells are required to produce meaningful quantities of gas. Shale gas companies are planning hundreds of wells per 10x10 km² PEDL licence area.

England’s most precious landscapes are already licenced for fracking, with PEDL (Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences) covering vast areas of the country. Although Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks have some protection, exploration and extraction can take place beneath these areas, which means that they will be surrounded by unsightly industrial complexes, thus reducing their attractiveness to visitors.

The Forest of Dean has no statutory protection although it is adjacent to the Wye Valley AONB, so fracking could take place over large swathes of land.

Widespread industrialisation of the countryside for shale gas production is incompatible with EFRA’s aim of developing sustainable rural tourism.

2 Fracking will have a negative impact on homes and businesses near well-sites.

Fracking will be allowed within 400m of homes, businesses and rural villages and drilling and fracking are noisy 24-hour-a-day activities – not conducive to encouraging visitors to stay for any length of time especially as fracking will create noise, light and air pollution and a huge increase in HGV truck movements which will make places less attractive for tourists. Visitors won’t want to spend their holidays in the shadow of a fracking well-site and will avoid fracking ‘blackspots’ so businesses close to a well-site, such as campsites, B&Bs, pubs, hotels, etc. will suffer a fall in visitor numbers, and result in lower employment and local income.

3 Fracking will result in a huge increase in heavy traffic on country roads.

Each fracking well-pad will have between 10 and 40 wells, which means tens of thousands of HGV movements to and from the site. Many of the areas selected for fracking have poor roads – narrow and winding – and HGVs will create traffic problems on these roads as well as causing noise and air pollution.
Travelling around rural areas will be far more difficult for tourists, residents and employees which will impact on rural businesses such as farms, shops and small factories, all of which rely on prompt deliveries for their businesses to function effectively.

The peace and quiet of the countryside and rural villages will be destroyed.

4 The health impacts of fracking will deter tourists from visiting fracking areas.

Fracking is banned or restricted by moratoria in many other countries, such as France, Germany, Bulgaria, Holland and Scotland, and in US states such as Maryland and New York State mainly because the impacts of fracking on public health are thought to be dangerous.

Dr. Howard A. Zucker, NY State Health Commissioner, who recommended a fracking ban in his home state after a six-year study, said, “Would I let my family live in a community with fracking? The answer is no. The potential risks of fracking are too great. In fact, they are not even fully known.” This last sentence is borne out by experiences in Australia and California where coal bed methane extraction led to uncontrollable fires. New studies from John Hopkins University show that people living near fracking wells are four times more likely to have asthma attacks and premature births.

If fracking were allowed across the English countryside, many people would be discouraged from visiting because of health concerns for themselves and their families.

5 Fracking will reduce employment in the rural tourism sector.

Tourism provides millions of permanent jobs for the rural economy (over 3.1 million in 2013, according to Visit Britain). Fracking would only provide a small number of short-term jobs at each well-site and most jobs on fracking sites would go to specialists brought in on fixed contracts, not local people. These are not long-term jobs. Even industry estimates of up to 64,000 jobs in 2024 from 4,000 fracking wells are dwarfed by the number of threatened permanent jobs in tourism as visitor numbers would fall and businesses would close.

6 Fracking will affect the reputation of food produced in tourist areas.

Rural economies depend on farming and food production as well as tourism. Many areas of the country are known for their high-quality produce and rely on this reputation to attract tourists to local food fairs, farmers’ markets, restaurants, etc. Fracking in these areas may compromise the quality and reputation of locally produced food as there may be the perception that food from farms grown near fracking wells could be contaminated.

This will result in lower sales, falling tourist numbers, and lower rural employment.

7 Our most treasured nature and wildlife sites are under threat from fracking.

Our nation’s protected areas, such as National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), World Heritage and Ramsar sites, etc. are hugely important for rural tourism and attract millions of visitors every year.

The legislation to protect these areas from fracking is non-existent. Currently fracking in these areas is only restricted by planning conditions and government policy statements, not legislation,
but current legislation does allow fracking well-pads to be situated just outside the borders of these protected areas and wells can then be drilled horizontally underneath the protected areas. National Parks, AONBs and SSSIs may therefore end up being ringed by fracking well-sites and the resulting noise, pollution and traffic would destroy the amenity of the country’s most precious and wildlife-rich natural places. This again would result in a dramatic fall in the number of tourists visiting the area.

8 Fracking will negatively impact wildlife tourism in the countryside.

Large numbers of tourists visit the English countryside to enjoy the wildlife that lives there, but widespread fracking will have a very damaging effect on wildlife populations, particularly if fracking wells are situated around the edges of protected areas like SSSIs. The noise, air and light pollution and increased traffic from fracking well-sites will reduce the population of wild birds and animals, many of whom will leave the area completely and drilling and fracking at night would have a detrimental effect on protected nocturnal species such as owls and bats.

This loss of wildlife will have a damaging effect on wildlife tourism in rural areas and a consequent drop in visitor numbers.

9 Water contamination from fracking could permanently impact an area’s reputation.

Fracking also brings with it the threat of water contamination through leaking wells, which could contaminate the aquifers that provide our drinking water, there may also be surface spills or other above-ground accidents, which could pollute streams, rivers and other water courses.

Fracking companies are not required to cover the cost to local councils or water suppliers to pay for environmental clean-up, if indeed such clean-up were possible and one incident of contaminated drinking water, or a catastrophic explosion at a well-site, would permanently damage the reputation of a popular tourist area for many years which would result in a drop in tourists visiting that area.

10 Fracking will reduce property prices, which will discourage rural investment.

Fracking will have a negative effect on house, land and property prices in fracking areas, particularly for properties within one mile of a well-site even if they are popular tourist areas.

The DEFRA Shale Gas Rural Economy Report stated: “A study in Texas concluded that house prices valued at more than $250,000 and within 1,000 ft of a well-site saw their values decrease by 3-14%.” and the same report went on to say: "House prices in close proximity to the drilling operations are likely to fall. There could be a 7% reduction in property values within one mile of an extraction site." While this might help with house purchase for residents in rural areas, this drop in property values will in turn will have a negative effect on rural business investment, as people will be reluctant to invest in new and existing rural businesses in areas where fracking is taking place.

A report in Mortgage Introducer magazine stated that properties near the only well that has ever been fracked, Preese Hall in Manchester, fell by 4%.

11 Public perception of fracking is overwhelmingly negative.
Fracking is extremely unpopular with the general public, with only 21% of the population supporting the process, according to the latest Government Wave 18 survey so they are unlikely to want to go on holiday to an area where this industry is established, again reducing tourist numbers.

12 Defra’s own report says that fracking would negatively impact the rural tourist sector.

Defra’s draft Shale Gas Rural Economy Impacts Paper, which was eventually published unredacted in July 2015, states the following: “Shale gas may transform a previously pristine and quiet natural region, bringing increased industrialisation. As a result, rural economy businesses that rely on clean air, land, water and/or a tranquil environment may suffer losses from this change, such as agriculture, tourism, organic farming, hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation.”

This paper also went on to say that fracking "may reduce the number of visitors and tourists to the rural area, with an associated reduction in spend in the local tourism economy."

The first time this report was published it was redacted 63 times, including sections on house prices, economic impacts, social services, local services and the executive summary.

The unredacted report was finally published in July 2015, only because the government was forced to do so by the Information Commissioner after a long-running public outcry.

When it was finally published, Defra distanced itself from the report’s conclusions, claiming that it was an early draft of an internal document, was not analytically robust, and that work on this report had been discontinued.

Many people wonder why the report was discontinued, instead of being re-drafted so that it was considered by Defra to be ‘analytically robust’ and suitable for publication. Was the effect of fracking on the rural economy not worthy of further examination?

Defra has therefore never completed a comprehensive report on the effect of fracking on the rural economy – which of course would include the rural tourism sector, the subject of this enquiry. Is this perhaps because Defra knows that the results of such a report would be overwhelmingly negative?

Conclusion

Defra and the Forestry Commission must oppose fracking in the Forest of Dean and other rural areas if they are to remain credible guardians of our countryside.

Defra in particular has a duty to oppose such large-scale, unproven developments within government, and should instead be working to promote sustainable, low-impact tourism and small scale industry in order to preserve the English countryside.

I believe that the EFRA Select Committee should commission a new independent report of the impact of the shale gas industry on the rural economy, including rural tourism and investment. Until such a report is produced, the EFRA Select Committee should demand an immediate moratorium on fracking and other forms of unconventional gas production.

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