INTRODUCTION

I am responding to this enquiry as an individual who is very concerned about the potential impact of fracking on rural tourism in England (and elsewhere). I live very close to two proposed fracking sites in the Fylde (Roseacre Wood and Preston New Road.) At the time of writing, this Government is considering whether to over-turn the decisions made by Lancashire County Council to refuse planning applications from the drilling company (Cuadrilla).

I am astonished that absolutely no mention is made of fracking in any of the documents associated with this enquiry. If ever there was an “elephant in the room” then the threat of fracking to the rural economy must surely be it!

I simply cannot see how a heavy industrialised process such as fracking can be anything other than extremely damaging to a rural economy and the jobs that it supports – especially in tourism and agriculture. I would suggest that visitors to the countryside are drawn by peace and quiet and rural panoramas. They will not be attracted by drilling rigs, burning flares and the attendant HGV traffic.

Many of the points raised below have already been raised in DEFRA’s own draft document Shale Gas Rural Economy Impacts.

DISCUSSION POINTS

General

The Department for the Environment, Farming & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) surely exists to promote the best interests of the environment, the farming community and other countryside stakeholders. It is for other government departments to fight for the interests of business and industry. This being the case, there is clearly a conflict at the heart of Government when it comes to shale gas. On the one hand, there is an exploitable resource but, on the other hand, this irreversible industrialisation of the landscape cannot be reconciled with the aims of protecting the rural environment and the health and well-being of those that live there. Fracking most assuredly will not enhance rural tourism.

Environment

Fracking is a heavy industrialised process. It generates noise, air and light pollution and heavy traffic. It is inimical to the peace and quiet of rural areas.

The industrial process can cause seismic disturbance (as was the case at Preese Hall near Blackpool in 2011).
There is a danger of contamination to water, air and soil.

Tens of thousands of wells are required to produce meaningful quantities of gas.

Many rural areas in England are already licenced for fracking with Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences (PEDLs) covering vast swathes of the countryside. This, in itself, is completely incompatible with the Committee’s declared aim of “enhancing the local environment and character”.

**Health**

Fracking is already banned or restricted by moratoria in France, Germany, Bulgaria, and Scotland and in US states such as New York and Maryland. These bans and restrictions are in place because of concerns about the threats to public health.

If fracking were allowed, many potential tourists would be discouraged from visiting because of those health concerns and, furthermore, local businesses might decide to re-locate for the same reason.

**Jobs**

Fracking would only generate a few jobs. Even the fracking industry itself estimates no more than 11 jobs per site and these are likely to be temporary, transitory and given to specialists on short-term contracts rather than people from the local community.

Set against the jobs created by fracking, there will be losses in the tourism and hospitality industries due to the inevitable drop in tourist numbers. Furthermore, there will be impacts on rural businesses such as liveries (roads no longer suitable for horses) and agriculture/horticulture (concerns about soil and water contamination).

It is quite conceivable that jobs will be lost as a result of the negative public perceptions of fracking. If, for example, supermarkets find that customers are unwilling to buy products (milk, meat, eggs etc.) from an area associated with fracking, they will source their shelves from elsewhere. This will mean that suppliers in a fracking area will lose business and reputation and may have to lay off staff as a result.

**Nature**

The Fylde is largely rural with Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), nature reserves and scenic viewpoints. It also supports nationally rare and vulnerable flora and fauna.

Many tourists come to enjoy the natural beauty of the area and to engage in countryside pursuits such as bird-watching, riding, cycling and walking. Such visitors are less likely to
come if the area becomes industrialised and the rural roads become less amenable for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrian activity.

24/7 drilling and artificial industrial lighting together with heavy traffic flows will inevitably impact upon sensitive species of bird and animal. And roadside pollution will have a detrimental effect on plants and trees. All of these factors will reduce wildlife and nature tourism.

**Property**

Fracking will be allowed within 400m of homes and businesses. Visitors will not want to stay in such close proximity to 24/7 drilling and its attendant noise, light and air pollution and heavy industrial traffic.

Businesses such as campsites, activity centres, B&Bs, pubs, hotels, cafes and restaurants will suffer a fall in visitor numbers as a direct consequence of fracking activity.

Fracking is also certain to have a negative impact on property and land values – especially those close to a fracking site. This, in turn, will affect investment confidence with people likely to look elsewhere for business opportunities.

There may also be increased business insurance costs for premises close to fracking activity as there may be an increased risk of damage sustained as a result of nearby drilling and the possibility of seismic activity.

**Public Perception**

The general public have been repeatedly polled as to their feelings about fracking and the results have consistently shown that the perception is negative. Even after recent publicity about the proposed Shale Wealth Fund and the possibility of payments being made direct to those living near a site, the public approval for fracking has remained low.

It is reasonable to infer from the poll results that, when choosing a holiday destination, people are unlikely to opt for a visit to an area where the fracking industry has become established.

**Defra report: Shale Gas Rural Economy Impacts**

Defra’s own report was finally published in full in July 2015. It had previously been offered in a heavily redacted form and, because of this, it was largely useless. This report was only published in full after the intervention of the Information Commissioner.

This original report was described as a “draft” but no attempt has been made in the period since (now over a year) to publish a definitive version.
This report made clear that fracking would inevitably impact on the rural economy bringing “increased industrialisation”. It also said 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.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- DEFRA published a draft paper in 2015 which looked at Shale Gas Rural Economy Impacts. This draft was never followed up by a definitive official report and many of the draft findings were heavily redacted at the outset. DEFRA must commission and publish (unredacted) a full, independent report setting out the impacts of the shale gas industry on rural economies.

- The EFRA Committee should demand a complete moratorium on fracking and all other forms of unconventional gas production until the above report has been produced and its conclusions properly considered.

- The EFRA Committee should revisit the planning process and recommend that much greater weight should be given to local democracy. At the moment, wind turbines can be refused where there is strong local opposition but such opposition is not considered salient with regard to fracking applications. This is inconsistent and illogical.

- The members of the Committee should consider visiting some areas currently threatened by fracking and should seek the views of those opposed to fracking. I would suggest, in particular, The Fylde in Lancashire and Ryedale in Yorkshire. Both areas have strong and well-informed campaigners.

- The Committee should invite some environmental groups (Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Campaign for Rural England etc.) to give evidence on the likely impacts of fracking on rural economies and, in particular, rural tourism.

August 2016