I am responding to this enquiry because I am particularly concerned about the effect that fracking would have on the rural environment in England, and consequently on the sustainability of its valuable tourist industry. I have visited Yorkshire all my life, and recently moved to York to be close to the county’s precious rural landscapes. I am dismayed to discover that some of these are already licenced for fracking, with PEDL (Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences) covering vast areas of it.

Ryedale in particular is a lung for many living in an increasingly densely populated island, and a popular tourist destination for people from all over the UK and beyond. The fracking proposed here, as elsewhere in the UK, is a heavy industrialised process destructive of the natural environment, which will certainly make the area less attractive to tourists. Industrialisation of the countryside for shale gas production is incompatible with EFRA’s aim of developing sustainable rural tourism, which is rooted in respect for the natural environment, wildlife and landscape. Drilling and fracking are noisy 24-hour-a-day activities, creating noise, light and air pollution; yet fracking is set to be allowed within 400m of homes, businesses and rural villages.

I already know of several families who have considered moving to North Yorkshire, but opted for other areas of the country because of the threat of fracking. Their concerns are not merely to do with the appearance of the wells, but with serious health issues. New studies from John Hopkins University show that people living near fracking wells are four times more likely to have asthma attacks and premature labour. In many countries with far lower population density than the UK (Germany, France, Bulgaria, and Scotland, and in US states such as Maryland and New York State) fracking is banned or suspended because the risks to public health are considered too great or not sufficiently known. The UK, with its high density of population and relatively small areas of open country for recreation is the last place in which to carry out a dangerous experiment, so destructive to the environment, for the profit of multi-national companies.

It can be confidently predicted that, like potential business investors and homeowners, tourists – walkers, birdwatchers, fishermen and sight-seers in search of unspoilt countryside and wildlife - will be put off, and that existing businesses close to well-sites, such as campsites, B&Bs, pubs, hotels, etc. will suffer a fall in visitor numbers. Widespread fracking would threaten thousands of permanent jobs in the tourist industry; while the USA experience has shown fracking to be a boom-and-bust industry that does not create long-term jobs.

Ryedale, as an example, is famous for farming and high-quality, often organic, food production, and there is tourism directly associated with this, to markets and food festivals such as that in Malton. Fracking threatens this burgeoning market, along with the integrity of the natural environment on which its reputation depends. 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.

Even the government’s generosity with tax-payers’ money in proposing to pay up to £10,000 to residents living near wells have failed to convince the public, with only 33% supporting the policy. Clearly, most people don’t like fracking, and are unlikely to want to go on holiday to an area where this industry is established.
Defra’s draft Shale Gas Rural Economy Impacts Paper, which was eventually published unredacted under duress from the Information Commissioner in response to a huge public outcry 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."

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. We 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? The history of this report in itself undermines public trust and confidence in Defra, increasing anxiety around fracking. Defra has 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.

I believe that the shale gas industry is the greatest threat facing rural tourism in England, and that Defra has a duty to oppose such developments within government. On a more positive note, it should instead be working to promote low-impact tourism in order to preserve the English countryside, with its resources for the tourist industry - landscape, wildlife, clean water, good air - into the future. The English landscape is a brand, nationally and internationally valued, loved and respected. Fracking – vandalism for short term gain - would destroy it.

I recommend that the EFRA Select Committee commission a new independent report on the impact of the shale gas industry on the rural economy, including rural tourism. 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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