I am responding to this enquiry because I am very concerned about the damaging effect that fracking would have on rural tourism in England, and also in the rest of the UK. I grew up in Ryedale, an area that is home to the first fracking well-site since Cuadrilla caused an earthquake in Lancashire in 2011 that caused a moratorium to be imposed, later lifted by David Cameron. This fracking well-site is located a few hundred yards from the village of Kirby Misperton, next door to Yorkshire’s largest tourist attraction of Flamingo Land, and close to the North York Moors National Park. My parents, friends and family still live in the area. I fear for their health, their safety and for the character of this beautiful part of England if this industry is favoured by Westminster (particularly by fracking cheerleader, local Conservative MP Kevin Hollinrake) over the established hospitality industry in the area that has taken decades of hard work to create by so many people.

Fracking is a heavily industrialising process of obtaining natural gas by forcing it out of shale rock deep underground at high pressure with sand and chemicals, that is completely unsuitable for the densely-populated English countryside. Unlike the USA, where this process has been in use since 2005, we do not have vast areas of uninhabited space, and our heavily faulted geology makes it even more dangerous and likely that leaks leading to irreversible poisoning of drinking water aquifers to occur.

Tens of thousands of wells are required to produce meaningful quantities of gas, requiring not only drilling pads but also pipelines, compressor stations and associated infrastructure that will lead to the irreversible destruction of our countryside. Some of England’s most precious landscapes like the Forest of Dean, Wye Valley, North Yorkshire Moors and many others are already licenced for fracking, with PEDL (Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences) covering approximately one third of the country.

A map of Petroleum Exploration & Development Licences (PEDLs) across the north of the UK.
Widespread industrialisation of the countryside for shale gas production is incompatible with EFRA’s aim of developing sustainable rural tourism. Fracking companies like INEOS are planning hundreds of wells per 10x10 km² PEDL licence block. Each fracking well-pad will have between 10 and 40 wells, which will require tens of thousands of HGV movements to and from the site. These trucks will cause noise and air pollution. There will be more queues, traffic accidents and damage to roads and verges. This 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.

Tourism provides millions of permanent jobs for the rural economy (over 3.1 million in 2013, according to Visit Britain). Fracking would threaten thousands of permanent jobs in the tourist industry, as visitor numbers would fall and businesses would close. Even fracking industry the industry’s pie-in-the-sky estimates of up to 64,000 jobs in 2024 from 4,000 fracking wells are dwarfed by the numbers of jobs in tourism that it puts at risk. In Yorkshire, businesses close to the first Kirby Misperton well-site, such as Flamingo Land and the campsites, B&Bs, pubs and hotels that surround it, will suffer a fall in visitor numbers. The local market town of Malton four miles away is proud of its reputation as the Food Capital of Yorkshire; Helmsley, on the edge of the North York Moors National Park, was the winner of the Best British High Street Award last year. Yorkshire is Europe’s leading tourist destination according to the Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/18/yorkshire-europes-leading-destination_n_5649016.html

Fracking will also affect the reputation of food produced in Yorkshire. Rural economies depend on farming and food production as well as tourism – they go hand in hand, complementing one another. Many parts of the UK are known for their high-quality produce and rely on this reputation to attract tourists to local food fairs, farmers’ markets, restaurants, etc. The introduction of fracking in these areas may compromise the quality and reputation of locally produced food. There may also 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.

Fracking 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 post a bond with local councils to pay for environmental clean-up, if indeed such clean-up were even possible. 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. Any water contamination incident would result in a drop in tourists visiting that area.

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. There is currently no primary legislation banning fracking within these protected areas. It is only restricted by planning conditions and government policy statements, not legislation. However, 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. There is nothing to stop National Parks, AONBs and SSSIs being ringed by fracking well-sites. 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.
Large numbers of tourists visit the English countryside to enjoy the wildlife that lives there. Eco tourism is becoming more popular, and people flock to the reserves they see in TV programmes like Countryfile and Springwatch. Widespread fracking will have a disastrous effect on wildlife populations, particularly if wells are situated around the edges of protected areas like SSSIs. Noise, air and light pollution and increased traffic from fracking well-sites will reduce the population of wild birds and animals. Drilling and fracking at night would also 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, as well as making life much less enjoyable for people who live there.

To conclude, it is clear that widespread fracking will have a very damaging effect on tourism in rural areas, and I believe that the industry is one of the greatest threats facing rural tourism in England. I feel that DEFRA has a duty to oppose fracking within government, and should instead be working to promote sustainable, low-impact tourism in order to preserve and protect the English countryside and the communities who live there – especially the children, whose futures are hanging in the balance.

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