

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION Nos. 73, 74 & 75

Dail Eireann

To ask the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the terms of reference he has put in place for the Environmental Protection Agency in relation to onshore hydraulic fracturing for gas. - Finian McGrath.

* For WRITTEN answer on Wednesday, 26th October, 2011.

Ref No: 31749/11 Proof: 91

To ask the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources his views that it is better to be proactive rather than reactive in relation to introducing new legislation to protect the environment if onshore hydraulic fracturing for gas proceeds as planned by the companies involved in the exploration.

- Finian McGrath.

* For WRITTEN answer on Wednesday, 26th October, 2011.

Ref No: 31750/11 Proof: 92

To ask the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if he proposes to commission an independent report to investigate and put in place regulations and procedures to safeguard and protect the environment if onshore hydraulic fracturing for gas proceeds as planned by the companies involved in the exploration. - Finian McGrath.

* For WRITTEN answer on Wednesday, 26th October, 2011.

Ref No: 31751/11 Proof: 93

REPLY

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources
(Mr. P. Rabbitte)

I propose to take Question Nos. 73, 74 and 75 together.

I indicated recently that I had requested the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to conduct research and advise on the environmental implications of hydraulic fracturing as a means of extracting natural gas

from underground reserves. The EPA is currently funding preliminary background research in the form of a study being carried out by Aberdeen University. The EPA had consulted with my Department before finalising the terms of reference for this study and my Department will continue to liaise with the EPA in relation to the commissioning of a further and more extensive study in 2012. The scope of this further detailed study will be informed by the findings of the Aberdeen University study and by information gathered by the EPA from a range of sources in the interim.

On the question of the over-arching regulatory framework that would apply in the case of any major onshore gas extraction project, there is already a comprehensive statutory framework in place setting down the development consents that would apply. The development of such a project would require a number of statutory consents including a planning consent from An Bord Pleanála under the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure Act) 2006, an Integrated Pollution Prevention Control Licence from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), along with a Petroleum Lease, a Plan of Development consent and a Gas Pipeline consent from myself as Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. A core element of these consent processes would be to consider the potential environmental impact of any proposed development.

In relation to the specific issue of the potential use of hydraulic fracturing technology as part of a gas exploration or extraction project, my Department has not received applications for nor licensed the use of hydraulic fracturing in the Irish onshore at this time. The onshore petroleum licensing options awarded last February in the Northwest Carboniferous and Clare Basins are preliminary authorisations and are designed to allow the companies assess the natural gas potential of the acreage largely based on desktop studies of existing data. This work is principally office/desktop based and does not involve exploration drilling or hydraulic fracturing. By the end of the option period in February 2013, the companies will have to decide whether to apply for a follow-on exploration licence or relinquish the acreage.

I have made it clear that in the event that any of the companies involved decide to apply for an exploration licence that proposed the use of hydraulic fracturing, the application would have to be set out in detail and be supported by an environmental impact statement. The application would then be the subject of an environmental impact assessment, which would include a public consultation phase. My Department would also consult with other relevant statutory authorities such as the EPA and the National Parks and Wildlife Service before reaching any decision.

In the event of a commercial discovery, any potential development for the onshore production of natural gas would require the authorisations that I have outlined above, including authorisations from An Bord Pleanála, the EPA and from me as Minister with responsibility for natural resources.

Work under these Licensing Options is at an early stage and it is too soon

to conclude whether or not these authorisations will proceed to the exploration licence stage let alone anticipate a commercial discovery that could lead to a petroleum production project. Notwithstanding this, my Department is engaging with a range of other State bodies with a view to ensuring that there is a joined up approach to regulation in this area.