

Book Review: Fracking America: Sacrificing Health and the Environment for Short-Term Economic Benefit by Walter Brasch

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Brasch, Walter M. *Fracking America: Sacrificing Health and the Environment for Short-Term Economic Benefit*. Sacramento: Greeley & Stone, 2015. xx + 668 pages. Paperback, \$34.95.

In *Fracking America: Sacrificing Health and the Environment for Short-Term Economic Benefit*, Walter Brasch—an award-winning journalist with a Ph.D. in mass communication—argues that fracking is not the appropriate solution to energy and economic security in the United States of America because it poses health, environmental, and social problems, and is mainly profitable only to natural gas corporations. However, while aware of the problems associated with fracking, the American government and political officials remain in support of it. Brasch uses numerous examples and case studies to illustrate these arguments, utilizing the state of Pennsylvania as his prime example.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section introduces readers to the history, politics, and economics of fracking in America. Brasch provides a brief history of America's energy policies including how natural gas fracking became endorsed by the government as a solution to the country's energy crisis at the start of the twenty-first century. By 2035, estimates are that about 45 percent of all America's natural gas will be produced by fracking and horizontal drilling. Brasch explains that natural gas fracking generates fast profit but mostly for corporations. Despite this, the American government frames fracking as a means of producing jobs, revamping the economy, and providing temporary energy security. Here, evidence to support the government's actions is not included by Brasch, but appears necessary to present readers with an unbiased rationale for it. Nonetheless, Brasch provides readers with a compelling argument about how political officials, especially Republicans, are notorious for legalising fracking because of the gains they receive from corporations such as funds for election campaigns, cash compensations, and employment ties. He uses Pennsylvania State as the main case study because of its history with fracking and corporate-political-regulatory collusion. Pennsylvania has the largest Marcellus shale fracking site, and it is indicative of the nationwide trend.

The second section is the heart of the book and it is useful because it presents readers with the different health and environmental problems associated with fracking in America. Using examples and case studies, Brasch lists, illustrates, and discusses, the environmental and health effects of fracking. The environmental problems include air, water, food, and noise pollution, as well as natural disasters, resource depletion, and ecosystem destruction. Among the resulting health problems are: stress; psychological, nervous system and respiratory problems; cancer; and lifelong disability problems. Nonetheless, what readers will find most disturbing is that the health and environmental effects of fracking are often not (or minimally) regulated under policies. Brasch does an excellent job confronting this issue with case studies. Unfortunately, in cases of environmental and public health epidemics resulting from fracking, key governmental actors such as State Departments of Environmental Protection (DEPs) and the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) conceal the source of the problem from the public and protect the responsible corporations. For instance, Cabot Oil & Gas contaminated the drinking water of residents around

Pennsylvania's Marcellus shale and was sued in 2009 by a number of the residents. Although the EPA's investigation proved the contamination to be true, Pennsylvania's State DEP argued the EPA's findings to be wrong. In the end, the EPA dropped its investigations and the case was resolved in 2012 with Cabot providing thirty-two families with financial compensation under a non-disclosure agreement. This section of the book would benefit from more hard data directly showing the relationship between fracking and the environmental and health problems associated with it.

In the third section of the book, Brasch calls the attention of activists, academia, and policy makers to the social effects of fracking in America, including how they can be addressed. He expounds on the collusion between fracking corporations and the government and political officials to deny, dismiss, falsify, and reduce scientific findings on the environmental and health impacts of fracking. He explains that the integrity of the academic community has also been compromised by the fracking industry. There are colleges, for instance, which allow fracking on their campuses and receive funding from the fracking industry, some of which is geared towards generating pro-fracking research that is often backed up with false data.

Brasch, however, leaves readers with some hope. He discusses examples of the involvement of society in the fight against the fracking industry including the various tactics used by the anti-fracking movement. He also argues that the fracking industry is trapped in a boom and bust cycle, and that countermeasures merely delay the bust. Lastly, he optimistically summarizes that fracking will not fulfil America's increasing future energy needs as fossil and natural gas are in decline and renewable energy is gaining momentum in America. In 2014, renewables accounted for about 16.63 percent of all domestic energy sources, and development in this area will be beneficial for the health, environment, and economy of Americans, with long-term benefits outweighing present costs. Brasch concludes that the American government should therefore increase renewable energy subsidies and reduce those for fossil and gas. This unfortunately appears to be an oversimplified way to end the book given the complexity that surrounds fracking in America. A more in-depth and realistic discussion about the future would have done better justice to this voluminous book.

Brasch's book is comparable to John H. Graves (2012) *Fracking: America's Alternative Energy Revolution*. However, while Graves' text provides a more balanced understanding of the benefits and problems of fracking, Brasch's book is more comprehensive and emphasizes the problems associated with fracking. Walter Brasch's *Fracking America: Sacrificing Health and the Environment for Short-Term Economic Benefit* is one of a kind. It is easy to comprehend and recommended for scholars, activists, and policymakers that are keen to understand the contemporary context of fracking in America, especially the problems associated with it.

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