

Water Use in Fracking Draws Legislature's Attention

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A flare burns in the Eagle Ford Shale in South Texas.

The drilling process known as “[fracking](#)” has opened up huge deposits of oil and gas in Texas and other parts of the country. It's brought plenty of jobs – and profits – to the state. But it also requires something Texas has in short supply – water. Now the issue has caught the eye of the Texas legislature.



At a joint meeting of the House Natural Resources and Energy Committees Wednesday, a large group of lawmakers got an earful on the subject, with a meeting that lasted hours. Most of the testimony came from folks in the oil and gas industry, like Corey Pomeroy with the [Texas Oil and Gas Association](#), who downplayed how much water fracking needs.

“The oil and gas industry accounts for less than once percent of Texas’ water in the exploration and production of oil and gas,” Pomeroy testified.

But under questioning by lawmakers, Pomeroy acknowledged that in certain locales, that percentage can be higher.

A recent UT study, [initially reported on by Kate Galbraith of the Texas Tribune](#), found that while fracking is a small share of Texas’ overall water use, it has been rising, going up about 125 percent from 2008 to 2011.

Locally, fracking can have a big impact. Two of the booming oil and gas plays in the state are in arid areas: the Permian Basin in West Texas and the [Eagle Ford Shale](#) in South Texas. In parts of the Eagle Ford, water used for fracking and drilling accounted for more than 50 percent of water use, according to the report, which was funded by the oil and gas industry.

A typical fracking job can require five million gallons of water, and in 2011, the most recent year for which data is available, drillers used about half as much water as the City of Austin did that same year.

Energy Resources Chairman [Jim Keffer](#), R-Granbury, said even if fracking is using a small amount of water overall, every drop counts.

“When you’re the last guy in, and you’re in a drought, and getting the press, I think it behooves the industry to make sure we are understanding where we are in the limelight ... and highlight the fact that we’re trying to get away from freshwater,” Keffer said. “It’s just a fact of life that we have to deal with.”

No environmental groups testified at the meeting, but the first to address the legislators was [Dr. Gerald North](#), a climate scientist at Texas A&M University. He warned that due to manmade climate change, Texas is likely to face more extreme weather in the coming decades, with less precipitation and longer summers. “The evidence is now strong enough that it should be taken very seriously by all of you,” North told the lawmakers.

There were plenty of solutions offered by the various companies and researchers who testified, with some of them advertised as being close to a market reality. One company, [MCR Oil Tools](#), said it had figured out a way to frack without using much water at all, and with just a couple of Ford 350 trucks instead of the fleet required for a normal frack job.

Stephen Jester of [ConocoPhillips](#) said that drillers can sometimes tap into deeper aquifers and use brackish water. Jester said water use and road traffic and damage were the chief concerns of locals where his company is active. He said since ConocoPhillips started drilling in the Eagle Ford in 2010, it’s reduced its freshwater usage by 45%. ConocoPhillips is also moving to a more gel-based fracking that uses less water, he said.

While Brent Halldorson, a representative of the newly-formed [Texas Water Recycling Association](#), an industry group, asked for tax breaks for drillers to encourage producers to recycle water.

That got the attention of Natural Resources Chairman Allan Ritter, [R-Nederland](#).

“It kinda sounds familiar, the first thing you do is come up and ask for tax incentives,” Ritter told him. “Boy, I’ve heard that a few times. Good luck with that, sir.”

Halldorson said he thought it was best for the industry to reduce its water use on its own, without any legislation or rules.

[Rep. Lon Burnam](#), D-Fort Worth, questioned that.

“You want to avoid regulation, but you still want incentives?” Burnam asked.

“We want to steer away from anything where we’re trying to force anything,” Halldorson answered.

The [Railroad Commission of Texas](#), which oversees oil and gas drilling in the state, is currently considering new rules that could make it easier for fracking companies to recycle and reuse more water for drilling.